

CHRISTIAN SCHOOLING AND THE REFORM OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

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What follows is my explanation, in some biographical detail, of how my educational and political commitments were formed and in particular, how my Christian political vision coincided with a clarification concerning my own education here in Australia.

Sooner or later our involvement with public education, whether it is through our own education, the studies we have undertaken to gain (legally-accredited) qualifications, or the schooling and education of our own children, we will give some expression to its inherently *political* dimensions. Any involvement in public education is itself political. In addition, what goes on in public education continues to give shape to our politics. The political struggles over the direction of public education have been formative upon the character of political life in this Commonwealth for some time before Federation in 1901.

Here in this extended discussion of the background to *Nurturing Justice*, I am explaining how, as an undergraduate student, I encountered the efforts of some Christians to again take up the task of the wholesale reformation of public education by setting up Christian schools. From this, my *Christian* educational and political commitments were initially formed; Christian political responsibility coincided with a clarification concerning my own education.

In terms of academic qualifications, I have a BA (Monash, 1972), an MSocSc (Waikato, NZ 1979) and a PhD (La Trobe, 1987). I matriculated from Blackburn South High School in 1968, was second top in the science stream, and had been deputy head prefect, school football captain, and leader of the Inter-School Christian Fellowship (ISCF). That school, which no longer exists, together with the local Anglican church were the major social venues in which my Christian life was initially nurtured. I became a Christian in the context of an emerging suburban evangelicalism in which Christians were expected to "reach out" and evangelize as part of their ordinary day-by-day life, as an expression of their love for their neighbors. My "Christian education" benefited from my own study of the Bible, I had subscribed to Scripture Union notes since primary school. Scripture Union was also the sponsor of ISCF.

I was one of two students out of the 42 students in my 6th form year who then went on to Monash University. Since I had been an active leader in ISCF, I joined the Evangelical Union, a thriving student club of over 200 members. My results would have allowed me to study Medicine, but I had decided that I needed further education before embarking upon any professional training. But increasingly, I became dissatisfied with my BA studies. Later, I came to the view that the poorly formed BA curriculum actually pandered to student aimlessness. That it did so was probably unintended, but perhaps it was evidence of an emerging existentialist tendency among an older generation of pragmatically-oriented educators. The curricular assumption was that students would bring about their own intellectual coherence in the privacy of their deepest "value commitments." There was simply no attempt to explain how studies in one area related to studies in another, and questions of that sort were usually ignored because they were not relevant to assignments and examinations. If such questions were ever raised, it was in the student cafe, and that may also help explain why, for my generation of Christian students, the university club (in my case the Evangelical Union) took on such a positive educational role for its members.

These questions about the coherence and meaning of our studies were actually the very questions to which students needed an answer if we were going to gain some overall sense of the meaning and purpose of our lives, let alone our university studies. However, BA studies were structured in ways that avoided such intellectual coherence—their meaning was found in what a BA would help you to do after your "uni" days were over. Therefore, as a result, they promoted a kaleidoscopic fragmentation, which also had the consequence of privatizing a student's view of the meaning of reality. For most, this was simply a logical outcome of "how things were" and like the law of the Medes and the Persians that could not be challenged.¹

¹ As an historical footnote, let me add this: there are many attempts to provide "critical" and "post-structural" interpretations of the demise of student radicalism, the eclipse of neo-Marxism, and the rise of neo-liberalism. My hypothesis is that the underlying assumptions of the university curriculum of the 1960s and 1970s provided the intellectual basis upon which repeated political attempts have since been

Toward the end of my second year, and in the summer before beginning the third and final undergraduate year, some events occurred that decisively shaped my life. During this time, I was introduced to a group of people, Dutch immigrants of reformed conviction, who were discussing social and political issues in ways that held out the possibility that this problem of intellectual incoherence could actually be resolved. They had set up an Association for Christian Social Studies and were constantly referring to a principle of “sphere sovereignty.” When I began to investigate this principle, it threw a penetrating light upon the deficiencies I had encountered in my university studies, as well as those trends within the evangelical way of life in which the privatization of the Christian faith was simply assumed. Shouting about one’s beliefs and encouraging others to shout as a sign of Christian piety, which was the alternative suggested by the charismatic advocates of the “Jesus revolution,” simply added to the overall culture of students shouting their demands. Moreover, to engage wholeheartedly in the shouting might actually have meant taking a step away from the biblical call to honor the Lord God by *doing* justice.

This “sphere sovereignty” principle is perhaps somewhat better known these days, and its association with the Dutch neo-Calvinist statesman, church leader, and journalist Dr. [Abraham Kuyper](#) (1837–1920) better understood. The systematic writings of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977) were the major philosophical articulation of this view.

I came to see that this principle applied to education in a most decisive way. Its immediate relevance was not so much that it helped me clarify the task of educational *institutions* like schools and universities, which it did, and which was quite appropriate in the context of the intense student political unrest at Monash. Nor was its major application that it confirmed the validity of Christians actually getting involved in forming ginger groups like the Christian Radical Club, or the ACSS. More importantly, this principle helped to clarify the purpose of

made to privatize public resources, beginning most noticeably in the 1980s. The political “privatization” process gained much momentum with the so-called “Dawkins reforms” of higher education here in Australia, under the Hawke-Keating Labor Governments, the impacts of which continue, virtually unchallenged in any political sense, to this day. This process simply confirms the concerted intellectual privatization that has been implicit in the utilitarian and pragmatic direction of university education for decades. A Christian contribution to public educational reform cannot afford to ignore the historical persistence of this dogmatic trust in a utilitarian approach to scientific knowledge that is part and parcel of Australia’s tradition of public education. However, the privatization of Christian belief is, effectively, to allow the meaning of faith to be hollowed out root and branch.

my own education, weaning me off the utilitarian view of the student vocation as merely a means to a professional end, part of a materialistic search for qualifications in order to fit myself for a well-paying job.

Because of this new insight, I began to take distance from evangelicalism’s academic and professional contributions, which had already dismayed me with its strongly utilitarian emphasis. For instance, I recall one prominent evangelical philosopher advising students from the platform of an international conference to “choose your ruts carefully!” When it is realized that much evangelical reflection in those days was focused upon gaining the spiritual wherewithal to lift oneself out of the humdrum secular rut of everyday life, you might begin to see how I came to interpret this advice as the result of a *philosophical* capitulation to means-and-ends thinking underlying such evangelical theology. An underlying accommodation to the utilitarian worldview took many forms; an extreme form even suggested that the *Christian* purpose of obtaining academic qualifications was to generate a class of well-paid, well-off professionals who could support foreign missions.

Nevertheless, with insights I began to develop from my investigation of writings that explored “sphere sovereignty,” the student task began to take on its own integrity. To be a student was to be already involved in a specific vocation under God’s blessing. It was not just a preparation for some future job. Thus, my understanding of the student task and myself changed—it was no longer framed in evangelical and utilitarian terms as an opportunity to engage in evangelism, or a means by which I could develop some Christian apologetic to commend the faith to fellow professionals. I also began to see my own study in historical terms. I could also reexamine what I had been taught to that point and I began to think about the way my teachers had understood their cultural-formative responsibilities. So I could reassess and come to a clearer view of the value of my life as a matriculant from a state-controlled high school. Then, despite the “kaleidoscopic fragmentation” of the Monash BA, I was reminded that I was still a member of that higher education community and on the way to being enlisted on its graduate roll. Therefore, I was in some small but still highly relevant way *co-responsible* for the spiritual direction of this university (and still am). For me “sphere sovereignty” became a principle basic to radical Christian discipleship and it assisted me in understanding and evaluating the loud denunciations that my fellow students were making of their education, even as they used their membership in the university community pragmatically, as the basis from which to engage in radical critique and political action. The insights of “sphere sovereignty” helped me identify ways in which the evangelical worldview had been captured repeatedly by ever more refined versions of utilitarian liberal humanism. I

began to sense the cumulative impact of a generation-by-generation privatization of the Christian faith, which many young Christians, like myself, and were sorely tempted to view as a *fait accompli*. By contrast, “sphere sovereignty” came to represent the possibility of a challenge to this secularizing process in the knowledge that there is a Christian political task. The truly radical reform of public education is indeed *part of the Christian student’s vocation*.

These ACSS people were not academics, but they seemed very much at home in setting up new associations. Most of them were involved in setting up primary schools in Mount Evelyn, Dandenong, and Donvale. Those are still in operation to this day as K-12 day schools.²

For these pioneering Christian immigrants, their advocacy of the “Christian parent-controlled school” was the outworking of the “sphere sovereignty” principle for the sphere of education. The questions I had about their use of this famous neo-Calvinistic term proved to be very important for how I came to see *education* as a vocation, and in particular in the development of my own understanding of Christian social philosophy. This meant that “sphere sovereignty” could be applied to public policy as a principle of comprehensive scope, and thus I could develop my sociological understanding of how public education functions in a *political* way. This may seem to be an overly complex explanation, but it gets at my sense of how politics relates to education and education to politics. Readers might also appreciate that this story has taken some time to emerge in its current form. Theoretical reflection is not simply some intuitive or instinctive, or even some habitual, process. Abstract thought and theory making have to deal with intuitions and habits of heart and mind, of nature and nurture, and sometimes it takes years for thinkers to come to clarity about complex issues.

When these ACSS people involved in Mount Evelyn Christian School used the term “Christian parent-controlled schools,” the hyphen served to emphasize the *kind* of school they had in mind. The placing of the hyphen is important. This was not about setting up a “Christian-parent controlled school.” They were assuming that theirs was a project for Christian parents, but the emphasis was not solely upon the *kind* of parent who would be in control. Rather, their emphasis was also upon the *kind* of school in which they could retain control of their responsibilities for schooling as parents. This was to be a school in which Christian parental responsibilities could come to expression and be respect-

ed. The distinction will sound a bit too cute for those seeking to privatize non-State schools and keep them outside the reach of State funding. In all likelihood, even for those involved in these schools it will be viewed as a theoretical abstraction rather than any decisive explanation of principle. Nevertheless, it is a very important point with far-reaching *political* and *curricular* consequences.

These were Christian advocates of schools of the parent-controlled *type*. Though they did not go very far in explaining this in theoretical terms, which as a student of sociology I would have preferred, their use of the term “parent-controlled” still drew attention to the *type* of school they were committed to building, in contrast to the other *kinds* of school, where the control is in the hands of other agents—*state*-controlled, *church*-controlled, *company*-controlled, and so on. In other words, in this school these parents were concerned that the parental vocation be given paramount respect, but not to the exclusion of their other public roles—e.g., as citizens, taxpayers, association and church members. They wanted to set up a particular *kind* of school known for its Christian educational commitment, *as a school*.

This attitude to Christian schooling, based upon the Kuyperian view of sphere sovereignty, in fact raises many questions of a structural kind that, to this day, have been inadequately addressed. How does such a school in its education of children give due respect to the parents of the school’s pupils without making the pedagogical authority of the teacher subservient to the demands of parents? A part of the answer is to be found, I believe, in noting how the school should publicly respect the parental-calling. The school, in all the facets of its complex operation and organization, should aim to facilitate the *parental type of educational responsibility*, i.e., in the family sphere, by providing a *schooling type of educational responsibility*, which is then worked out by teachers and parents working together *coram Deo*.

The term “parent-control” was not used in some blind ideological denial of the existence of other *kinds* of Christian schools, nor was there any lack of awareness of other controlling agents in other schools of a different *type*. Indeed, what is implied is a view of the way primary and secondary schools function in the public arena and in terms of an implied framework that reckons with the responsibilities that God has given to parents for public education. In addition, since parents give form to that responsibility based on differing religious commitments, this view of “sphere sovereignty,” as applied to the Christian parent-controlled school, leads to a view of public education that is explicitly “religiously pluralistic.” Hence, such a school can point the way to a comprehensive public education policy for all schools.

² Members of the Monash Christian Radical Club, which I had initiated as the Vice-President of the Evangelical Union, were among the first teachers employed by the Mount Evelyn Christian School in the school’s first years after 1973.

This view implies that there can and should be other (confessional) kinds of (parent-controlled) schools. The appeal was thus somewhat more complex than first appeared and, as I said, the theoretical implications of this view were not worked out in full detail, nor have they been worked out in terms of their evident political consequences.

On its own, the stated commitment to “sphere sovereignty” cannot overcome the many and varied misunderstandings of the term that immediately arise when parents are concerned that their control over the school’s affairs was being undermined, or compromised by the presence of other controlling agents (or of teachers and teaching, they do not understand).

Around that time (i.e., the 1970s) anxieties began to surface among the parental constituencies of some of these newly established schools when proposals were put forward that encouraged schools to develop their own “educational creeds.” Would that not compromise or contradict the church creeds of many of these association members, which, they claimed, had motivated their support for a “parent-controlled” school in the first place? What was very often overlooked in that discussion, which became exceedingly bitter and contentious in the early 1980s, was the unresolved ambiguities with the use of the term “parent-controlled.” In particular, insight into its proper use as a public signifier of how *a school community confesses* its own (pedagogical) responsibilities *coram Deo* was in danger of being eclipsed in a struggle between various competing groups to retain *control* of what was then a movement that had effectively begun a decade earlier when the different school associations were set up in different locations around the country.

Thus, when a Christian school says that it is a school of the “parent-controlled” type, it is also making that profession in a public context where there are indeed other types of schools characterized by commitments to other agents of “paramount control.” There are schools of the state-controlled type, of the church-controlled type, and of the company- or business-controlled type. In addition, there are schools of the Christian-parent controlled type, which have a very negative or reduced view of the teaching vocation. But in its proper sense the term “parent-controlled” is not meant in any legalistic sense as if the supervision of teachers and the forming of curriculum is simply handed over to parents; rather it is a *creational* principle that is confessed when the school acknowledges its dependence upon parental-nurture as the God-given precondition for the ongoing nurture, development, and maturation of the school’s children. Schools have entry ages. Schools are formed with recognition that it is parents who have to enroll children in the school, that they have the prior responsibility for nurturing their children just as the UN Declaration says.

But such schools, particularly when they have only recently been set up, also stand in need of an ongoing educational program *for the parents* who come forward to have their children educated in these “parent-controlled” schools. Moreover, my *political* conclusion is that without programs for the education of such parents, the term “parent-controlled” becomes the focus of intense public ambiguity, and opportunities to develop a national movement for the reformation of public education are neglected.

And so, in the setting up of the school associations, and attracting other Christian parents who would wish to see their children schooled in such a school, a need indeed arose for the *continuing education* of association members, and also of the other interested parties who may not have become members of the association for various reasons. But this would mean that the association would itself have to take on an ongoing educative function in its local community, something that was not fully articulated as part of the work of these school associations when they were initially set up. Given the attempt to base these schools in a principle that was in danger of being eclipsed in an ongoing way, from one generation of parents to the next, by the dominance of a State-controlled ideology that forms public schooling, one has to wonder why these school associations were not set up from the outset to also promote Christian public education in a wider sense. After all, it is only in the wider context of public education that Christian schools make sense. Without such an ongoing program, any fledgling school must become increasingly vulnerable to all kinds of pressures. I do not know exactly why this kind of parallel educational development was not attempted in these pioneering school communities. Instead, other bodies came to compete with each other in order to fill this vacuum.

The pioneers were immigrants belonging to one particular church or group of churches and it is possible that they did not adequately understand the many-sided public educational impact of what they considered groundbreaking efforts to set up their schools. Even before the schools were up and running and their doors were opened, they must have confronted the complex social situation that had to emerge from amongst supporters. These schools were being planned by a *public association* that was in control of the development, overseeing the work, employing founding principals, and arranging for the implementation of its plans. So why wasn’t the school promoted as an association-controlled school? After all, this group of parents *associated* to form this association for a parent-controlled school. Further, when the school was up and running, having employed a principal who would appoint staff and form the curriculum, didn’t this become, in this respect, a teacher-controlled school? How can it *still* define itself as a par-

ent-controlled school when this is part of its *modus operandi*? Moreover, with its acceptance of State guidelines for accreditation and compliance with the State's legal standards, is it not at least in some respects and to a considerable degree, a state-controlled school? And given that the preponderance of the school's children are of parents who attend the same local church or churches is there not a sense in which the school comes under the influence of such Christian faith communities and so, could not this school be seen as, in some sense, as a church-controlled denominational school?

How are these pertinent questions to be answered? Have they been answered? I suspect that there may well have been papers and articles published, at some time or other in this school movement's history, which tried to address these questions. But if they have been produced for discussion with and between these schools, they should have been published more widely as part of the parallel development of a Christian effort to reform public education.³

However, it is not such an easy task to generate interest in such a much-needed "extra mural" development. To do so within the context of those schools cannot properly be done without actually clarifying the term "parent-controlled" in relation to primary and secondary education. That will also mean developing public discussion about the **exact** meaning of the term *control* when it comes to public education.

The problem with the term "parent-controlled" **now** is its inherent ambiguities, despite the "sphere sovereignty" insight that may have once lain (silently) behind it. This brings us to the way the term "control" usually functions in political argument in this polity, and how a privatized view of Christian parent-controlled schools leads inexorably to a transformation in which it becomes a school movement characterized by the kind of parents it wants to attract rather than the type of school it wants to see developed. Hence, as mentioned above, the development of Christian-parent controlled schools.

In this country we blithely assume that education is a matter of "freedom" and in the context of education and schooling the word "control" immediately brings with it notions of dominance and imposition of external standards that detract from the essential freedom of the people engaged in the task under consideration. But the term, as it was used by the ACSS people, in those early days before MECS was opened, did not emphasize the imposition of external moral standards upon the internal

life of the school, but of a public association that would give shape to a school in which teachers and students could freely go about their educative work in the understanding that schooling is a responsibility of parents *coram Deo*.

The pertinent metaphor that stands behind the ACSS people's use of "parent-controlled" actually refers to the control of the artisan who controls the materials at hand to pave a bathroom, of the painter who controls his tools and brushes and the mixing of his paints to re-decorate a house, of the builder who assembles foundation, frame, and materials to erect a family home. In this sense, the term "parent-controlled school" refers to an intention by parents to gather and use their common God-given resources and powers *as parents* to give shape to an enterprise, to a going concern, that requires their diligent attention. Therefore, the term "parent-controlled" signified an intention to begin work on *forming and crafting* an alternative Christian school movement, but also to be part of a thoroughgoing Christian effort to reform public education. The aim involves educating parents and would-be parents in the art of school crafting. Moreover, the work once begun should not be laid aside as completed when one's own children have become former students of the school and gone on to other study, work or, whatever.

I suspect, albeit in retrospect, that these schools were (and still are) seriously hampered by the need to constantly clarify the *type* of school they envisage. This is because the public ambiguity over the use of the term "control" cannot be overcome and resolved by mere argument, by mere statement of principle, let alone by profession of a particular "educational creed." In addition, I suspect these ambiguities cannot be adequately addressed without such a wider movement of Christian education and a reformation of the country's system of public education in all of its dimensions, including higher education and professional training. This then confronts us with the fact that involvement in schooling is already inherently political.

The question then is about the character of the political vision by which this political involvement is nurtured. Is the political involvement of Christian parents in such schools going to be viewed as integrally related to the distinctively Christian political voice of Christian citizens?

It is to be expected that once a school is up and running, that it will have to expertly manage a range of complex problems that arise from enrolling the children of parents who do not become members of its school association, or who come from beyond the social circles of the founding parents. These complex administrative issues will arise about the way such parents relate to the

³ If such papers have answered these questions, the question remains: Why is it that we have not seen these parents and the graduates of these schools becoming the Christian advocates of a generation-to-generation effort to reform public education at all levels?

school's curriculum, the association's constitution and how together with the other members of the parental constituency their voice is to be properly heard. These are necessarily public issues for the school to attend to, which in turn call for responsible stewardship, and they cannot ever be properly resolved without *ongoing parental education*. It is simply no argument for non-State schools to function as if their task is merely to maintain a niche in the educational market place. This is because there is already ongoing political education in our taken-for-granted utilitarian political culture in relation to all school communities. It is not a question of whether such political education takes place in relation to schooling, but how it takes place and the overall direction in which schooling is headed. And thus via schooling it is simply unavoidable that there be ongoing political formation of those involved, having a direct bearing on the way in which all the people of this nation view themselves as citizens. This is simply part of the way any school exists as a public social entity.

So now, ways have to be found that help to clarify the Christian vision of parental responsibility for schooling, and my point in this discussion is that this cannot be done without also taking seriously the political tasks of promoting educational justice and the corresponding reform of public education. Christian schools need their own public policy research. Theoretical insight is needed into the inner connections between parental nurture, the parental task of crafting a proper response to the child's need for schooling, the actual school program, and the citizen's role in state crafting. Such research is one crucial way in which a school community's vision is kept fresh and up-to-date so that teachers, council, and supporting community can fulfill their respective responsibilities.

My views on the need for Christian politics arose from reflection upon the issues that arose from efforts to launch the "parent-controlled" type of Christian school. The principle of "sphere sovereignty" is also highly relevant for reforming public education and assessing how the State should treat all schools with justice and equity. In that sense, the efforts of *Nurturing Justice* are not cast as the voice of any particular public association or political movement. However, they do have a view of the *kind* of public associations *NJ* hopes to see develop, as well the kind of Christian political movement that should be a part of Australia's public life.

Parents are already involved in public education simply by complying with the law of the land and arranging for their children to attend school, whatever school that may be. The "parent-controlled school" should nurture a dynamic process in which deeper insight into how the running of the school and of the provision of education will result. Such insight is for all involved, including the

State authorities. When the God-given parental responsibilities are respected, as they should be, then all agents can freely make their interdependent contributions. When parents take the opportunity to get further involved in *public educational service*, by becoming active as school association members or in other ways through study, then they will not only become better acquainted with the complex effort that goes into their children's schooling, but this then will become the basis from which to reckon with the other types of schools qualified by the other kinds of "primary" or "paramount" control ascribed to other institutional agents. Are not these schools also a part of our every-day experience of schooling in this complex society? Do not our neighbors, whom we are commanded to love as ourselves, transact their responsibilities in these schools?

The "parent-controlled" school may be viewed by those involved as a normative type of *public school* because of the school's confession that God calls upon all parents to maintain well rounded care for the nurture of their children. Just because parental care for their children's schooling is being taken into account, it does not mean any lessening of their care as adult citizens. The parental vocation should unfold as a God-given precondition for social welfare in all facets of our lives, private and public, and thus deepening the citizen's concern for all children and their schooling.

In terms of principle, this approach to schooling is not somehow *owned* by schools and the parents because they barrack for a particular kind of school, in the way they support a football team. No. Much rather, by their confession, such a school embracing and embraced by its parental community, implicitly says that the approach owns them—"His love is like the parent's love of children" (Psalm 103). In these terms, it is an approach that is available in all kinds of schools, and so further work is anticipated by "parent-controlled schools" to commend such an approach wherever parents are seeking to take up their God-given responsibilities. This is just as important as explaining the distinctive *intention* of the parent-controlled school.

Without such openness to the political task of *nurturing* public education, the parents of these "parent-controlled schools" will find themselves enunciating a way of schooling, and a way of education, that too easily sets them on a collision course with State education authorities, if not other school systems. Then indeed, it will be a "private" versus "public" clash, or a competition for control of a niche in the education market place. Collisions may occur and sometimes they may be unavoidable. A stand will have to be taken. However, collision with State-authorities over the administration of public education can too easily spill over into the competitive friction of mutually self-interested schools of whatever

type. Christian schools cannot afford to become involved in “niche wars” that must arise between schools that operate as businesses. Self-interested attempts to commend their school as God’s gift to public education should not have a place in Christian schooling. Such hubris has to be scrupulously avoided (see 2 Corinthians 10 again). In that sense, building a *Christian* school is no different from establishing a Christian political movement, or trying to maintain a political education broadsheet. What is being sought is the maintenance of a *service* that is and remains accountable from the heart to Jesus Christ.

The political struggle in education is also about the normative structure within which schooling is developed. It is part of a *public* expression of Christian discipleship that follows when Christians accept their corporate vocation to be responsibly active, as parents, in the ongoing nurture and schooling of their children.

That structural precondition remains politically significant throughout a child’s schooling, and retains its *political* relevance particularly in our public education culture in which schooling is too readily assumed primarily a State responsibility or else a private commercial opportunity. In addition, the cumulative impact of State dominance in education with its ongoing efforts to further privatize public education too easily dissuades parents from being fully engaged in their children’s ongoing nurture as students and citizens. There are some signs from politicians and public officials that this Statist tendency needs to be challenged by a grass-roots revival of responsibility for public education. For this to become part of a significant political option for Christians, a political theory of public education must be developed to account for the many sides of human responsibility that are presupposed in any school and by our complex and multi-layered educational structures. Of course, these responsibilities can sometimes be ignored, abused or malformed, and in that regard the theory’s appeal to normative principles should not degenerate into an attempt to suggest that Christians are somehow more responsible than other citizens are. It just isn’t so. The aim must not degenerate into some pompous demand for an equal share of State funds, as if some abstract “equity” in public funding per capita, of itself, would somehow bring the much-needed reforms. Here Christian politics as much as Christian education and schooling seeks to confront traditional and structural discouragement with the encouragement of Jesus Christ.

Parental responsibility does not replace the pedagogical authority of the school, even as the school’s pedagogical authority in the nurture of schoolchildren *presupposes* parental nurture. The trust that should come to expression in the classroom has everything to do with the respect for the parental office given by the school, its

teachers and its Council, as well as the underlying philosophy by which authorities grant legal accreditation to academically qualified teachers. This principle therefore has intense *political* significance for the way Government should relate to all schools. It provides incisive insight to assist Christian “outreach” to parents, whatever their religious disposition, since all parents of all schoolchildren in all schools not only have to come to terms with the power and ideology driving and maintaining public education, they are also accountable, as parents, for their children’s education and schooling. If State education authorities continue to form policies that presume that the State school is the normative standard for all parents of all school children then that view needs to be coherently and comprehensively challenged by a Christian philosophy of public education that gives due recognition to the “parent-controlled” principle. It is not parental control at the expense of State involvement, but parental responsibility to control the nurture of their children that should be given due respect in the task of forming any school’s identity as well in the task of forming a just polity in which all schools can go about their tasks. Those of us who want this principle to be rediscovered in its full extent need to face up to its political implications for public education. The principle is an implicit encouragement to all parents to give active respect to their God-given responsibilities for their children’s education. Here also, in bare outline, is a Christian view of the basis for equity in the State’s relationship to all schools and school systems. All questions are not thereby resolved, not least by those raised by parents who continue to demand a “private” schooling for their children.

By providing a coherent way to interpret my own schooling and educational experiences, I became convinced that this “sphere sovereignty” principle has great relevance for all citizens.

It is now that we confront a point of some difficulty—how should supporters of such Christian *public* schools respond when they are considered “private” schools, the results of a “parental choice” for a non-State school? What we face here is not merely a debate about “rights” based on private decisions. Rather the political debate is also about what is authentically public.

Back in the 1970s, I embraced the view that the “parent-controlled” principle could open up public policy to reckon with the possibility of non-State, authentically *public* schools. But since then the predominant drift in public policy has been and continues to be in the other direction—and in the absence of the aforementioned movement for a Christian reformation of public education I can only fear that the “parent-controlled” principle, where it is still articulated, has been eclipsed by the

view that such schools are merely a peculiar kind of “private” school.

The absence of a corresponding Christian political movement concerned with the wholesale reformation of public education bears sad witness to a privatization tendency of these alternative public schools. Therefore, a good question to ask at this juncture is this: how could these schools resist the implicit “privatizing” of their “parent-controlled” principle? To resist the label “private” is to face seemingly insurmountable problems: how is a small school with a modest national network of schools with limited resources to resist the predominant liberal humanistic ideology driving public education in this country? These schools, along with many other non-State schools, have to come to terms with the State’s processes of registration and accreditation and to keep within departmental guidelines for receiving their share of public funds for their school’s programs. A school must struggle to retain its Christian integrity, just as any Christian must take up the cross and follow Christ.

From the standpoint of a Christian worldview, the Lord Almighty holds parents accountable for the education of their children. This being the case, those who advocate “parent-controlled” schools should not form their associations and their schools as if this principle is simply their own private property. Whatever insight they have captured of a basic principle should be considered by them as a public and political gift that needs to be developed and shared across the country and throughout the region as part of a renewed Christian political contribution to the healthy reform of public education in its entirety. How can the liberal humanistic *status quo* for public education be challenged when the *political* potential of the “parent-controlled” principle for public schooling is ignored by its own advocates? How can “sphere sovereignty,” as a creational principle, contribute to political reform if it is held onto as if it be the private property of a small group of Christians? The simple answer is that it cannot.

If the “parent-controlled” principle, with its basis in “sphere sovereignty,” is what God calls us to, as I have

here explained it, then we not only confront a God-given responsibility for schooling, but also a principle for our political life as citizens. By following Christ, we discover that we are indeed accountable for our stewardship of public life and that must mean public education as well. We confront a task that involves working to *reform public education* at all levels from kindergarten to university and beyond.

This brings us back to the peculiar task of those who seek to nurture justice in our world today—a positive educative role in political life must also consider the public aspects of family nurture, and take seriously the diverse institutions for the education of children, kindergartens, and schools, while not ignoring home schooling. In addition, we need to consider higher education, the training in scientific proficiency, and the learning of trades and technological skills. And then we will not exclude from our discussion the way in which organizations that have a specifically *political* purpose should relate to the wider educational needs within our society, while also keeping in mind the way in which institutions with a special educational focus, like schools and school associations, can contribute to healthy *political* debate and begin to address the deep needs of our polity and in particular to encourage all citizens to actively work for justice.

There are of course many other issues. We will also have to give attention to how community organizations contribute to the educative formation of its residents in their service “outside school hours.” How should our political perspective view the education that takes place within the context of a “faith community” (a church, chapel, synagogue, mosque, temple, etc.)? These, with many other questions as well, begin to take on political significance when we see the reform of public education as a *political* task that all Christian citizens should support.

The task of developing a Christian political perspective on education is indeed in need of a political *theory* that is comprehensive in its scope, and recognizably Christian in its outlook. *Nurturing Justice* seeks to promote such a political theory.