

# **Issues in Reformed Theology**

## **The Family**

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This class follows up our last class on infant baptism. The same issues that resulted in the practice of infant baptism in Reformed churches influence other areas of life with those children. This class will look into the connection between the beliefs of Reformed Theology and the practice of its followers.

To be sure, most families in Reformed churches do not likely understand the theological implications that church doctrine may have on their practices. Indeed, these doctrines may be only a part of the reasons behind their family practices. But as doctrine affects Reformed families, we can seek to understand how to better serve others as well as think through applications of our beliefs for ourselves.

### **1. The connection between Reformed doctrine and family practice**

Reformed churches baptize infants because of their view of the Covenant of Grace, which we described in our previous class on Covenant Theology. Children of believing parents are considered to be part of God's covenant of grace and incorporated into the covenant community through baptism. This covenant community is beyond simply infant baptism.

The covenant community that includes the children of believing parents is derived from the Reformed understanding of the Old Testament. In the Covenant of Grace, the entire history of God's work with man is viewed as derived from one promise of salvation through faith in Christ. It makes little distinction between God's work during the different eras of biblical history, and in particular fails to see the issue of God's distinct promises under different biblical covenants. Thus the Old Testament is indistinct from the New Testament in significant ways. For example, the church is seen in the Old Testament and is considered to be the "new Israel." The promises and commands to Israel can be imparted to the Church and the moral aspects of the Law of Moses apply today.

The children of covenantal families in the Church are seen as being incorporated into the people of God similar to Old Testament times. In the Old Testament, circumcision was the sign by which male children were included into the people of Israel and the Reformed view sees baptism as assuming that function in the Church. As the physical descendant of Israel would be circumcised, so the physical descendant of the Church is baptized. Just as physical descendants of Abraham were expected to be faithful followers of God, so the physical descendants of believers are expected to be followers of God. Regeneration is presumed, which in Reformed thinking precedes faith. Once the assumption exists through baptism that the child is destined for faith unless they become apostate, other practices logically follow.

However, under the Old Covenant, Israel was a family of families, held together by bloodlines and circumcision. Under the New Covenant, the Church is the family of God, not a family of families (Galatians 3:28-29; Ephesians 2:19-22). Indeed, under the New Covenant, nuclear families may be fragmented because of loyalty to Jesus (Matthew 10:34-39).

When parents are led to believe that their children are part of the church and should be expected to be followers of Christ, families begin to adopt methodologies according to the belief. What are the unintended consequences of parents feeling the weight of the expectation of spiritual life with their children? What pressures will be brought upon children as they grow into adulthood to remain a professing believer? What types of parenting styles are adopted when the presupposition of regeneration exists? What happens when some children remain unbelievers?

## **2. Child evangelism**

The view of children of believers as being baptized into the covenant community of faith affects ministry to children in the church. For example, Louis Berkhof writes in his systematic theology, “The Bible speaks in absolute terms of the necessity of regeneration; not so of the necessity of conversion. It tells us plainly that, 'Except a man be born again (anew, or, from above), he cannot see the kingdom of God,' John 3:3, but does not speak of the need of conversion in the same general way, which allows of no exceptions ... The expressed or implied exhortations to turn about, found in Scripture, come only to those to whom they are addressed and do not necessarily mean that every one must pass through a conscious conversion, in order to be saved.”

This view that conversion to Christ is optional, not normative for the believer, will drive how we minister to the children in the family and the children in the church. There is a disincentive to help children to view themselves as lost, dead in sin, and walking according to the world since children of believers are considered holy in Reformed theology based upon 1 Corinthians 7:14. The children need to have faith but this faith is presumed to exist and manifests itself in the elect children as they grow.

David Engelsma of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America explains, “covenant, baptized, Reformed young people are made the objects of an "evangelism" that treats them as unsaved sinners who must be saved by accepting Christ. If this is what is meant by the conversion of the child, Reformed parents and the Reformed church reject it in the name of the covenant of God sealed to their children in infancy.”

The unfortunate result of such belief is that the enthusiasm for the communication of the gospel, if not the content of the gospel itself, is diminished. Reformed ministries may treat children of church families differently from unchurched families. They may emphasize obedience to commands of God to children who do not have faith in Christ. As this type of ministry continues into adulthood, the lasting effect is moralism. People growing up with the presumption of regeneration apart from genuine conversion is a recipe for spiritual inertia.

### 3. The role of families in worship

There are two practices that have become increasingly prevalent in Reformed circles with regard to families. The first is the rise of “family worship” and the second is the inclusion of entire families in the worship service.

#### a. Family worship

Families are often exhorted in Reformed churches to practice “family worship.” This consists of gathering the family together, typically daily (except for Sunday), for a time of singing, Scripture reading and instruction, prayer and often some form of catechism involving questions and answers from written material based upon confessions and church teaching.

Regarding the importance of family worship, Ligonier Ministries (founded by R. C. Sproul) writes, “Before God established worship in the tabernacle, his people worshiped in family tents.” Their section entitled “Scripture requires family worship” supports this statement by stating:

*“Specifically, God requires heads of households, like good shepherds, to lead their families into green pastures (Josh. 24:15). God expected Abraham to “command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord” (Gen. 18:19, emphasis mine). Consider also the example of Cornelius, “a devout man...who feared God with all his household” (Acts. 10:1). It is no surprise that when Peter came to Caesarea to preach the gospel, Cornelius rallied his household to attendance. “We are all present before God,” he said, “to hear all the things commanded you by God.”*

Clearly this is quite dubious support for suggesting that the Scripture requires families to conduct family worship gatherings in their home. Conservative Reformed leaders greatly overstate the case and lead people to adopt a personal practice advanced under the premise of biblical obligation.

To be clear, it is a good thing for families that wish to gather children together for a formal time to do so. But this approach is nothing more than a methodology that may or may not have fruitfulness. Families that opt for different methodologies are responsible only to the Lord and should not be judged based upon the applications of others.

#### b. Children in the worship service

Also common among Reformed churches is the value seen in having entire families together in the Sunday worship service. The most extreme part of this practice also advocates against the separation of children in church ministry according to age. Known as the “Family Integrated Church,” this approach has grown in recent years among homeschooling families with Reformed influences. These type of churches are often Reformed Baptist and they view churches that have youth and children’s ministries as undermining God’s role for the family.

As the now defunct Vision Forum expressed, “the age-integrated communities of family and church are the God-ordained institutions for training and socialization and as such provide the preferred pattern for social life and educational endeavors. The modern preference for grouping children exclusively with their age mates for educational and social purpose is contrary to scriptural wisdom and example.”

Far more common among Reformed churches is the inclusion of children in the worship service while still conducting ministry to children based upon their age. Many churches bring children into the entire worship service. This of course is true of churches from many doctrinal viewpoints because of the complexities of establishing children’s ministry on Sunday morning. However, Reformed churches will advocate for this as part of the family role in worship. Great significance is placed upon children observing and joining with their parents in the worship service. Some churches will include children for part of the worship service before dismissing them to children’s ministry prior to the teaching time rather than including them for the entire service in order to reduce distraction. Regardless of the format chosen, the role and function of children in the church is influenced by the view that children are a part of the covenant community.

#### **4. Schooling of children**

The practical effect of the perspective of a covenant community that includes children can be seen in the schooling of children. Some reformed denominations have instructed families to send their children to Christian schools. One example is the Canadian and American Reformed Churches which states in their article on church order, “the consistory shall endure that the parents, to the best of their ability, have their children attend a school where the instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God as the church has summarized it in her confessions.” Another example is found in the Protestant Reformed Church in America, “The consistories shall see to it that there are good Christian schools in which the parents have their children instructed according to the demands of the covenant.”

The organization *Christian Schools International*, notes the difference between covenantal Christian schools and missional Christian schools:

- “the covenantal Christian school is a school that is founded by Christian parents (and usually with the support of churches) to train, instruct, and nurture the children of believing parents.”
- “the missional Christian school is a school founded by Christian parents and Christian churches to train, instruct, and nurture any child of parents who desire a Christian education and who may be led to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through the Christian school.”

The emphasis upon the specific training of “children of believing parents” is a manifest tenet of many Reformed churches. The goal is not to lead children to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ but to train those who are a part of the covenantal community.

With the advent of homeschooling, the participation of Reformed families in Christian schools has decreased. One example is from the Christian Reformed Church which saw a decrease from 87% of families enrolling their children in Christian Schools to 48% of families enrolling their children in Christian Schools between 1978 and 2007. In a survey conducted by Baylor University published in 2010, it is apparent that a greater percentage of children in Reformed churches who enter college were homeschooled than from any other form of denomination persuasion.

Why do Reformed churches tend to be opposed to the public school system? One significant reason given is they view that sending children to public schools is inconsistent with the command of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 of instructing children.

This stems from the view of the Church and Israel. There is a lack of appreciation for the difference between the Church and Israel in many ways, including the means by which the Church fulfills her role as God's people. The mission of the Church is to go to the Gentiles. The mission of Israel was to remain distinct from the Gentiles. When the Gentiles came to worship the true God under the Old Testament era, they came through the nation of Israel. There is a connection between the Reformed view of the role of the believer as part of the covenant community of the New Israel and the desire to separate church families from the secular community.

## **5. The Biblical Patriarchy Movement**

Biblical Patriarchy is a philosophy of male leadership that views the father as the head of the home and responsible for the conduct of his family. It is derived from distinctly biblical teaching of male leadership. The difficulty lies when basic biblical teaching is applied dogmatically.

The danger is when male leadership begets female servitude, particularly in the domestic capacity. This raises issues with women working outside the home or the role of the father in overseeing the process of his son or his daughter in seeking a spouse. There is a connection between those who advocate Biblical Patriarchy and the "Quiverfull Movement" of viewing God's command for procreation leads Christians to abstain from family planning of offspring. Some question the value of daughters attending college and others permit college attendance if the daughter lives at home and attends a Christian college. They are not opposed to daughters of Christian families being educated but the purpose for this education is to serve the home. Homeschooling is normative among those adhering to Biblical Patriarchy and it is through this sphere of influence that the ideals of this movement have flourished.

Reformed leaders are most prominent within the Biblical Patriarchy movement. But to be clear, these are not the mainstream of Reformed pastors and leaders. But they are influential in Reformed circles and are prolific in prorogating their ideas that can resonate with socially conservative Christians concerned about increasing secularization and worldliness of our society.

Those not directly promoting the Biblical Patriarchy movement have become associated with its leaders, such as Voddie Baucham's role as a plenary speaker at the 2012 Shepherd's Conference hosted by Grace Community Church in Sun Valley California. This provides Biblical Patriarchy a greater sense of normalcy within Evangelicalism and promotes the rhetoric without an examination of the belief system. Church leaders become influenced and church families become vulnerable to a message of the withdrawal from relational engagement of our community rather than engagement with the unchurched for the purpose of advancing the gospel.

Furthermore, we can observe leading Reformed theologians manifest the thinking of the Biblical Patriarchy movement. For example, R. C. Sproul (whose son is a main proponent of Biblical Patriarchy writes the following in answer to the question, "My teenagers are beginning to resist going to church. Should they be forced, and if so, to what age?" –

*The Bible tells us that we ought never to neglect the assembling together of the saints, which is corporate worship on Sunday morning. I take that to mean that it is my obligation as a Christian, as a member of the covenant community, to be in worship on Sunday morning with my household. So it is my responsibility to see to it that my children are in church. It is also my responsibility to be sensitive and gentle and not tyrannical, so I have to somehow find that fine line of being firm but loving, gentle, and kind in that firmness. Again, I am accountable to God for their being there for the nurture and instruction of the things of God on Sunday morning. So my answer to the first part of your question is yes. I don't like the word "force" because to some people that means baseball bats and child abuse. That's not what I'm talking about. I am talking about parental leadership whereby the authority resides in the parents and you see to it that the authority is carried out. You asked to what age: I would say as long as the children are under your roof and under your authority as part of your family unit."*

Notice how Sproul sees the command of Hebrews 10:24-25 to be beyond the responsibility of himself but that he also bears the responsibility for the obedience of his household. This thinking obviously leads to pressure being put on to children beyond adolescence to conform to their father's demands regarding church attendance. This issue is not whether the dependent child ought to conform to parental desires (they should since they are dependent), but rather what the biblical requirement is for the parent.

Is the parent himself actually under obligation for their covenant child to follow biblical commands? Sproul indicates the answer is "yes." This view that we as parents have an obligation to gently but firmly get our children to do God's will as we see it will be opposed by some older children living in our home. What other biblical obligations might be required of the child by the parents? It appears that when opposition occurs the only righteous alternative is to remove the son or daughter from the household if they do not choose to obey our applications of God's will (regardless of whether they possess saving faith or not).

This perspective stems from the view of the “covenant community” and the perspective that the child is expected to be a Christian. Thus the commands of Christ for the church fall equally on the child and this explains why they must obey what they may not actually believe. Certainly we are responsible to what we do but the sin of our children is not completely in our own ability to control and each individual will be judged for what they do (Ezekiel 18:20; Hebrews 9:27).

There are many aspects of the Biblical Patriarchy movement that are not from the Bible but are advanced as if they were. As we encounter these we ought to be discerning and even help others to avoid the legalism of human opinions on the family.

## **6. Conclusion**

There are many reasons why churches and families choose to do what they do. Doctrine is one part of the motivation for choices and may not even be the most significant factor. Yet Reformed doctrine does have an impact on church families. This impact is not limited to families in Reformed churches. Beliefs that stem from Reformed Theology have a particular influence on families in churches with a Calvinistic view of salvation. Those who may not baptize their children as babies may nevertheless adopt other beliefs of Reformed Theology and the covenant child.

So often, people who do not have an understanding of the philosophical basis behind certain Reformed teaching they will advocate such teaching simply because they desire the outcome. This is particularly true with teaching regarding families. As parents desire godly children, they might be tempted to use teaching and employ methods of Reformed teachers without appreciating the existing presuppositions. The result is adherence to practices based upon rhetoric that is persuasive but not biblical.

The children of Christian families are born sinful and unsaved. Each person needs to embrace Jesus by faith. There is no salvation by heritage. Faithful Christian parents have unsaved offspring and unfaithful Christian parents have godly offspring. The gospel requires a personal commitment from every person, regardless of how much of the Bible they grow up learning about. We cannot presume that anyone is destined for eternal apart from repentance, which includes change. The unregenerate heart must be converted and our message of salvation is the same for everyone, regardless of their religious background.