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That They May Teach Them to Their Children

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God's covenant of grace not only determines how God deals with His people, but by it God forms a real relationship with His people. This same covenant determines the place of children in the church and in the homes of believers. It is evident, then, that the particular view of the covenant held by parents and teachers will regulate the instruction, yes, even the character of the Christian school.

The theology of the conditional covenant is that God establishes His covenant with every baptized child unilaterally, but the maintenance of the covenant is bilateral, for the child must believe and obey, else the covenant is null and void. God promises to each child at baptism that all the blessings of salvation are his, objectively, but for the child to possess them subjectively he must fulfill the conditions and believe the promises. The implications of the conditional covenant for the Christian school were explored in the last article.

The Protestant Reformed Churches maintain that God establishes His covenant unconditionally

with His chosen people in Christ. God's covenant with His people is a bond of friendship established with believers and their seed in the line of continued generations. The theology of the unconditional covenant is radically different. It is our contention that the schools based on this covenant doctrine not only ought to be, but are in reality, different.

Let it be established that the covenant of grace is the foundation of Protestant Reformed schools. That can be documented. The constitution of the Heritage Christian School in Hudsonville, MI, is representative. It states it plainly in Article I—BASIS:

This organization is based on the following principles:

A. The Bible is the infallibly inspired, written Word of God, the doctrine of which is contained in the Three Forms of Unity, and as such forms the basis for administration, instruction and discipline in the school.

B. Our Sovereign, Triune, Covenant God has from eternity chosen and in time forms a people unto Himself that they may stand in covenant relationship to Him, and live to His praise in friendship and loving service in all spheres of life, in the midst of a sinful world.

C. The training of the covenant children in the school as well as in the home and in the church must serve to prepare them to follow their life-long calling to reveal the glory of their God in a life lived from the principle of regeneration by grace.

The fact that God establishes His covenant of friendship with believers and their elect children demands Christian education for the youth of the covenant. These children are God's, and He wills that they live with Him and love Him. Children who will live with God in loving fellowship must know Him! They must be reared in the fear of His name. They must be trained to live as covenant people in the midst of a hostile, ungodly world. Christian education is therefore required.

In addition, because the covenant is not with the individual, but with the body, the entire body of the church unites to provide Christian education for all the covenant children. Love for God's covenant draws unmarried men and grandpas to the school society meetings. The joy of covenant life with God leads believers of all ages to give cheerfully to the cause of covenant schools.

The covenant is the heart and foundation of the Reformed school. If it is not the compelling motivation of the founders and supporters, then other, non-Reformed principles will direct the schools. Perhaps it will be fear of world contamination—world flight, in the spirit of the medieval monasteries. Perhaps the Christian school will be considered a missions endeavor—first for the children of believers, and then for the neighborhood. Others would establish the school as a kingdom-service training center, preparing the youth to take over the world for Christ's (earthly) kingdom. Or, motivated by the hope of earthly success, parents might establish an exclusive academy for the gifted to help their students excel academically.

None of those capture the reason that Reformed parents had historically for establishing Christian schools. Nor are they the foundation for Protestant Reformed schools. These are rather covenant schools, preparing covenant children to live with their God in a life of love and friendship, both in this life and into eternity.

In such a school, the students are rightly viewed as covenant children. They are born into the sphere of the covenant. They are part of the organism of the tree of the church—children born to believing parents who have God's promises that He shall gather His church from their children. In harmony with that promise, and in obedience to God's command, parents baptized these children.

Are they elect? We know not. Do we presuppose they are regenerate? No. Do we presuppose they are unregenerate? Absolutely not. Rather, Protestant Reformed parents and teachers follow the principle of the judgment of love as the Canons describe it in III/IV, Art. 15. "With respect to those who make an external profession of faith and live regular lives, we are bound, after the example of the apostle, to judge and speak of them in the most favorable manner. For the secret recesses of the heart are unknown to us."* This judgment of charity is warranted also with regard to the children born to believing parents, since God promises that He does establish His covenant with believers and their seed.

Teachers treat their students as regenerated children, that is, as believers. When students sin, even grievously, teachers are not quickly driven to the conclusion that the children are not saved. Teachers are keenly aware that believers do sin grievously against their God. Applying Scripture in all circumstances, teachers look for and demand repentance, believing that the Spirit will work sorrow for sin and the daily conversion described in the Heidelberg Catechism. To be sure, they warn students of the dreadful wrath of God against sin. Teachers also walk with the students to the cross of Christ and give them the assurance of free—not conditional—forgiveness in His blood.

It is the solid conviction of the Protestant Reformed teacher that God ordinarily does regenerate the elect covenant child in infancy. There is certainly no impediment to that thinking in the unconditional covenant, since salvation does not depend on any condition placed before the covenant child. In harmony with that, immediate regeneration is taught in the Protestant Reformed Churches, specifically, that the Holy Spirit regenerates not by means of the preaching, but directly (immediate, not with means). That God regenerates elect children in the sphere of the covenant at a very young age, even at conception, is perfectly in harmony with the covenant as a relationship of friendship, because God desires that His children learn to know Him from all the instruction of a parent and a Christian teacher, and that from a young age.

The teachers instruct in harmony with that principle, that is, that their students are regenerated. They gear their instruction to young believers who have the new life in Christ planted in their hearts. What confidence an instructor can have that his labor—that hard, spiritual work of planning and teaching every lesson from the unique viewpoint of Scripture—is not in vain!

The doctrine of the unconditional covenant has other implications for the Christian school. Is Christ the center of the school based on the unconditional covenant? Most emphatically. He is the heart of the covenant. Without Christ, there is no covenant. God established the covenant with Christ eternally, and in Him with all the elect. If the instruction is covenantal, it must be Christ-centered, for rich covenant life is the goal of God in revealing Himself to His people. Such instruction will be always pointing to Christ as the revelation of God in salvation, in history, indeed, in all things. Truly all things were created by Him and for Him, and are upheld and governed by His mighty power.

As noted earlier, the goal of the school is to prepare the students to live with God in covenant fellowship, and to do so already in this life. Teachers endeavor to equip their students to stand as

representatives of God's cause in this world. Students are being groomed to live out of the covenant life in whatever calling God gives to them.

It follows, then, that the instruction framed according to the unconditional covenant of friendship with God will maintain the antithesis. Friendship with God is so powerful that it draws the covenant member to live unto Him. That, in turn, inevitably results in enmity with the world (James 4:4 ^[1]). Friendship with God demands rejecting any and all sinful activity, even if it is suggested or promoted by a fellow baptized member of the covenant. The antithetical life mandated by the covenant of grace draws the line between sin and obedience, not merely between baptized and unbaptized.

The covenantal basis of the school also determines the character or atmosphere of the school: godly fellowship. This fellowship exists between teachers and students (no, they are not buddies, but they are friends). Fellowship is manifest among students—they live as friends, for Jesus' sake, who has made us to be His friends. The faithful Protestant Reformed teacher has this as a proper goal for his classroom and the school. It is put before the students, and demanded of them, that they leave none out, but seek proper Christian fellowship with all their classmates.

What of the discipline in such a school? It emphatically is exercised in the Christian school. The goal of such discipline is to draw the erring student away from sin. Sin is offence against God and disrupts that blessed fellowship between God and the believer.

Thus, also, obedience is set before the students as a covenantal obligation. The distinct instruction of the Christian school is this: Obedience is your obligation as covenant children—your part in the covenant (see the Form for the Administration of Baptism). Obedience is not required in order to earn your place in the covenant. Rather is it required of you out of gratitude to God for taking you into the covenant, and giving you concretely, personally, the blessings of salvation. Students are exhorted to live out of the power of that covenant life.

Thus the motive for obedience flows out of the covenant, namely, gratitude for the real, experienced blessing of the covenant, namely, life with God.

Concluding Comments

The Protestant Reformed schools we have are the fruit of the covenant. Fathers and grandfathers built them deeply conscious of their covenant obligations. If the present generation loses sight of that, these schools will be lost in the next generation. For a generation, perhaps, Christian schools can be maintained on the basis of tradition. But the next generation will soon conclude that the endeavor is not worth the expense.

There are already too many schools, originally founded on the covenant, that have caved in to the financial pressures and accepted government aid. Some receive as much as 50% of their support from the government. Such compromise with the principles of covenant education spells disaster. The end of such capitulation was manifest a few years ago in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, where one entire Christian school system gave itself over to the government—buildings and all!

The Protestant Reformed schools are based on God's unconditional covenant of grace with us, though in this sinful world the principles of the covenant are not always rightly manifest. However, these schools shall slip off the foundation if parents and teachers fail to labor consciously and

deliberately out of that truth. We have no reason to boast, for what do we have that we have not been given? Rather, we give thanks for God's faithfulness.

To whom much is given, much is required. We have a system of schools handed to us by our grandparents and parents. We have the glorious Reformed, biblical understanding of the covenant that rightly understands the place of children in the covenant. What shall we do with these blessings? Let us see to it that these are covenantal schools—in basis, in the content of the instruction, in discipline, in atmosphere, in goal. Then, indeed, we may expect God's blessing, a blessing that comes not because of, but in the way of faithfulness.

** This agrees with the teaching of John Calvin, who insisted that God wants us to know who are His elect church members, yet we need not know this with absolute certainty. Calvin writes, "But as here full certainty was not necessary, he has in its place substituted the judgment of charity, by which we acknowledge all as members of the Church who by confession of faith, regularity of conduct, and participation in the sacraments, unite with us in acknowledging the same God and Christ" (Institutes, IV, 1, 8).*

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Links:

[1] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=James+4:4>