

EDUCATION WITHIN THE REFORMED TRADITION: *What Are We Really Talking About*

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Recently two trends have been affecting many Christian schools that traditionally have viewed themselves as being "within the reformed tradition." One trend is toward a more multi-denominational clientele. No longer is the Christian school primarily for Christian Reformed kids; parents from many different church backgrounds now enroll their children in these schools. As a result the word "reformed" is often dropped from the school vocabulary as being too exclusive, and reformed principles for education give way to broader evangelical ones.

A second trend is the gradual erosion of reformed principles within Christian schools that have been around for twenty-five years or more. In these cases the reformed Christian perspective has virtually disappeared while the primary focus of the schools has turned to academic and athletic excellence, thus creating very fine private schools, but ones with only high moral overtones.

My contention is that in the first scenario the schools are "selling their birthright," for their "reformed" framework is easily the most legitimate rationale for their existence as Christian schools. No one is doing anyone any favor by getting rid of it. In the second case, to use another metaphor, "the emperor has no clothes." Many of these schools tend to be neither reformed nor very Christian, no matter what their promotional material says, but few have the courage to say so.

In both cases, a common ailment has afflicted the schools: too few people can articulate what "reformed" really looks like within Christian education. Thus it is easy to give away that which is not understood. That's a shame, for just as Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and, more recently, Baptists and Pentecostals all have unique traditions within which they educate, so the reformed people have something pretty special to offer. It's time, I think, to review what those special things are.

Before listing principles that are unique to "reformed" Christian schooling, I must clarify that when we use the term reformed, we are not speaking about particular church denominations. Rather, we are referring to a theological position that has

emerged from the Scottish Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed traditions, both of which go back to the reformer John Calvin. Today this reformed theology can be found in Reformed Baptist and Reformed Episcopal churches as well. All of these churches could endorse the following principles for education.

The Sovereignty of God

1. God is sovereign over all (in contrast with a dualistic, sacred-secular position).

When John Bratt taught the course on Calvinism at Calvin College, he would begin by asking students to identify the central theme of Calvinism. Many students (including me) chose the five points represented by the acronym TULIP. "Wrong," said Bratt, "it's the sovereignty of God!" That's what Dutch statesman-theologian Abraham Kuyper meant when he uttered the now-famous words: "There is not an inch in the entire area of our human life which Christ, who is sovereign of all, does not call 'Mine!'"

Reformed education points to God in every subject, not simply in biblical studies or chapel services. This God-connection is imperative. It allows every vocation to bring glory to God, work to be worship, and life to be religion.

Is it easy to demonstrate this God-connectedness in every subject, unit, and lesson? No. But God must be the starting point or our teaching will succumb to either syncretism—adding religious frosting to a secular cake, or dualism—stating that some things are secular and some are sacred. God forbid! Christian schools within the reformed tradition acknowledge that God transforms learning; he is more than an add-on. He is Sovereign Lord of all.

Revelation

2. The Word incarnate, Jesus Christ, is creator, provider, and redeemer of the cosmos and all within it (rather than solely Savior of humankind).

In the beginning God spoke the Word or Logos Jesus Christ and creation was formed. This same Word "sustains all things" and "holds all things together" in providence and lawfulness (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15-20 & 2:2-3; Hebrews 1:2-3). And this Word died for the redemption of the entire cosmos, seeking to re-

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store every aspect of the world (i.e., culture) to his definition of normalcy.

Creation structure bears the fingerprints of God. Because there is order in creation, creation can be known. But to know creation as God intended, the Logos—the “controlling principle in the universe”—must be known.

3. *The Word inscripturated, the Bible, is viewed as divine spectacles through which to understand created reality (rather than as a textbook per se).*



To understand the world in which we live one must view it through a biblical world view (e.g., creation-fall-redemption). The Bible serves as the interpretive “bottom line” for the curriculum; it does not exhaustively deal with every aspect of created reality; textbooks based on creational revelation do that.

The Bible’s focus is on God, not people. The question is “What is God saying?” rather than “What is humankind doing (as a moral example)?”

The Bible is to be studied in its entirety, rather than limiting its relevance to certain portions of the New Testament. Francis Schaeffer stated that the omission of the first three chapters of the Bible would decimate his understanding of the world and his place in it. To properly understand God’s written word, one must view it as a whole, beginning with the garden of the old creation (Genesis 1 & 2) and ending with the city of the new creation (Revelation 21 & 22), acknowledging Jesus Christ as the center of it all.

The Bible is also to be read contextually, rather than in a proof-texting manner. Scripture must interpret scripture.

4. *God has revealed himself through his creation as well (rather than solely through Jesus Christ and the Bible).*

God has revealed himself through the creation; thus creation is worthy of study. Psalm 19 states: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the works of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge” (vs. 1-2). A study of creation must always point the student toward God.

The truth revealed through creation is to be understood contextually, against the backdrop of Scripture and a biblical world view. And the structure or connectedness within creation needs to be reflected through a unified and integral curriculum.

5. *The revelation of God always calls for an active response (rather than simply the assimilation of information).*

Yadah, the Hebrew word for “knowledge,” is holistic in nature. Students are to understand God’s truth with their minds, they are to believe God’s truth with their hearts, they are to do God’s truth with their total being. Lessons are to be taught accordingly, for the goal is to lead students into responsive discipleship. Passive Christianity is an oxymoron. Authentic assessment based on real-life application replaces instruments that test only lower-level factual knowledge.

Creation-Fall-Redemption

6. *Creation includes all of culture (rather than only the physical realm).*

In the beginning of time God issued to humankind the “creation mandate” to be steward over and developer of creation (Genesis 1:28; 2:15). The reformed position has expanded this mandate to include all of culture, thus the term “cultural mandate” is used most often today. Creation is one of the three primary relationships of life, joining relationships with God and one’s neighbor (i.e., society). Each relationship contains its own unique responsibilities.

To some degree the cultural mandate is a set of marching orders for the Christian school, for every aspect of creation or culture (e.g., politics, the arts) needs to be both cared for and developed. The multi-faceted creational revelation of God becomes the primary source for curriculum.

Creation norms—God’s original intent or desire—exist for each area of creation and thus for each area of study. Unit plans need to include creation norms for each topic being studied.

7. *This world belongs to God (not to the evil one).*

God has never and will never abandon his creation. Thus the Christian school needs to engage culture, not flee from it as something inherently evil. We sing “This is my Father’s world” rather than “This world is not my home.” For this reason Christians can live without fear within this world. They educate their children in Christian “boot camps” rather than in “cities of refuge.” Students are being prepared to engage and redeem culture rather than escape from it. A key word within reformed vocabulary is transformation. The light of God’s Word enlightens and “norms” every facet of creation.

8. *The effects of sin are cosmic (rather than solely personal).*

When Adam sinned the entire creation was negatively affected, not just human beings. Today the creation groans for deliverance from the bondage of decay brought on by sin (Romans 8:19-22). Unit plans need to include the question “In which ways has sin affected this area of study?”

9. *The antithesis runs through people and organizations (rather than around them).*

The antithesis is the struggle between right and wrong, between good and evil, between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. No person and no thing is absolutely evil or absolutely good. The world cannot be divided into good guys and bad guys. George Washington did some bad things. Bill Clinton does some things right. Christian schools do some things poorly; public schools do some things correctly.

There are a number of reasons for this. The key reason is that people are both structurally good and morally evil at the same time. They are totally depraved (tainted by sin) rather than absolutely depraved (becoming sin itself). Consequently, they can do moral and civil good, but not spiritual good (outside of the Holy Spirit’s power).

Because nothing in creation is evil (1 Timothy 4:4-5), at least in its essence or structure (in contrast with direction), because Christians are to “be in the world but not of it,” and because culture is to be engaged and transformed for Christ rather than be avoided, the reformed position on such things as film, dance,

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and alcohol is "all things in moderation." This differs from dualistic Greek thought that declares the body evil and the soul or spirit good, and the earthly realm evil with the heavenly realm good, a position many Christians have adopted.

10. Even though the direction of creation is evil, its structure remains "good" and redeemable (rather than evil and needing to be destroyed).

Again, because nothing in the essence or structure of creation is evil (1 Timothy 4:4-5), even though the moral direction of creation is, the world in which we live is not a throw-away world. It will, in fact, some day be redirected and renewed. Thus, environmental concerns are not simply "save a whale and hug a tree" poppycock; they are eternal in nature, for the creation will be redeemed, not destroyed. To teach about God's good creation remains valid even after the fall.

11. As the effects of sin are cosmic in scope, so redemption through Christ affects all of creation (rather than only individual parts).

This is a continuation of items 8 and 10 above. God did not create a throw-away world. Creation will be redeemed and renewed rather than destroyed. The entire cosmos is part of God's redemptive plan. At the end times heaven and earth will come together for the full consummation of God's kingdom (Revelation 21:1-2).

The Greek word for "new" used in 1 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1 is *kainos*, which denotes "that which has just made its appearance." Believers will spend eternity on a *kainos* earth that is a new, improved version of the one that has already existed. Rather than strumming harps throughout eternity, life in the consummated kingdom will not be dissimilar to life today, except it will be lived out within God's perfect shalom. Christian schools are to be teaching toward this shalom, seeking to usher in the kingdom now, even in a limited way.

A key task of the school is to equip students with the vision and skills for the redemption of all of creation, including society and culture. Unit plans need to include the question "How can this area of study be reclaimed or redeemed for the advancement of God's kingdom and his glory?"

It must be remembered, however, that only when Jesus returns will the redemption of creation be complete.

Covenant

12. The focus of the Christian school is primarily on the nurture of children who have been consecrated by God (rather than the evangelism of children from non-Christian homes).

The children of believers have been declared holy or consecrated (set apart for godly purposes) by God (1 Corinthians 7:14). He desires "godly offspring" (Malachi 2:15). These children are to be nurtured (i.e., instructed and corrected) in the ways of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Ephesians 6:4) so that generations yet unborn will "put their trust in God" (Psalm 78:1-8). This is in contrast with the Christian school being viewed as an evangelical outreach of the church. Rather, the Christian school complements and extends that which is already taking place within the Christian home.

This covenantal relationship is broadly communal rather than

individualistic. The entire Christian community bears responsibility for the Christian nurture of God's children, not just the parents.

These special children require a special education, for they have been "called out" for a special task, that of advancing the kingdom of God.

Kingdom

13. The central focus of Christ's earthly ministry was the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth (rather than the salvation of sinners).

The earthly ministry of Christ was broader than but inclusive of the redemption of humankind. The focus was the reestablishment of the rule of God over every square inch of creation. Through his perfect life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection, Jesus broke the stranglehold of sin on creation and laid the groundwork for the redemption of his people and his good creation. The kingdom will be consummated in full when Christ returns. Until then, however, the body of Christ is to occupy itself in obedience, reclaiming territory lost to the kingdom of darkness because of the fall.



The kingdom of God is at the same time "already" with us and "not yet" with us. One implication of this is that current events can be dealt with at face value for the here-and-now rather than as a part of end-time prophecy. Christians are to live both for the present and the future, not just the future.

The Purpose of the Christian School

14. The mission of the Christian school is to educate the children of believers toward becoming actively involved in the unfolding and advancing of the kingdom of God on earth (rather than escaping from or writing off the culture in which they live).

There are many reasons why parents enroll their children in Christian schools. Reaction to the evils of the world is a primary one. Some do so out of tradition. Others seek God's truth for their children. Yet the most comprehensive and biblically compelling reason is that children belong to God and are to be educated with his purposes in mind. They are called to be conformed to the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:29), with transformed minds (Romans 12:2), seeking to take every thought captive for Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5), so that Jesus can be acknowledged Lord of all (Philippians 2:11) and God's kingdom may come, his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.