

The Biblical Basis and Goal of Christian Education (1)

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The subject of this article is one that lies dear to my heart, and indeed to the heart of our Protestant Reformed Churches. It has been well developed in the churches and it is found important throughout the churches. For that reason, this article will not set forth any new thing. But it is not without reason that we give our attention occasionally to the biblical basis and goal of Christian education, even to refresh our minds and renew our zeal for this cause.

It becomes evident in [Psalm 78](#) ^[1] that foundational to Christian education is the truth of God's covenant, established with believers and their seed in the lines of continued generations. Because God, in sovereign mercy, is pleased to establish His covenant with us and our children, and because He is also pleased to use *meansto* fulfill His will, even *weakest* means, He gives us the calling to teach our children. So I call your attention to the biblical basis and goal of Christian education.

The Basis

I begin by calling your attention to the opening verses of [Psalm 78](#) ^[1], where the psalmist speaks on behalf of God's people and acknowledges an obligation to covenantal education that belongs to all generations in the church. And although, as we find in other passages, it is an obligation that rests primarily upon the fathers of the households, nevertheless, this passage is far more broad in its reach.

The address of this Psalm is not to fathers only. It is to all Israel, the entire church, to you and me exclusive of none. "Give ear, O my people," says inspired Asaph. A striking element of this Psalm is the recognition of the breadth of our responsibility and obligation to God's covenant children.

We often overlook that obligation as it applies to every one of us. We like to focus on the

obligation of the parents to their own children. After all, that seems only natural. And this Psalm does not in any sense deny the solemn obligation of parents toward their own children. Scripture speaks of that calling of fathers and mothers repeatedly and from many points of view.

But Asaph's concern in [Psalm 78](#) ^[1] was not the enrichment of the home, nor the particular calling of parents, first of all. But his focus is upon the important role children play in the generation of the church as the one body of Christ.

That is evident from the very language of the text. Notice in verse 4, the psalmist does not even refer to his own children and the children of his own generation as our children or *my* children, but *their* children, namely, the children of those whom he calls "our fathers." They are the *church's* children.

It is important for us to see that, in order that we might have a proper perspective concerning the instruction of our children. Although we certainly distinguish the spheres of each, and find particular roles and responsibilities in each, there is to be no *separation* of church, home, and school.

This obligation, acknowledged by Asaph and by us who join him in this song, is an obligation that has as its basis God's good pleasure to save His church in the line of succeeding generations. All covenant instruction is based upon the truth that children as well as their believing parents are incorporated into the covenant of grace. God's church is an organism. The generations of believers have their roots in the past, and the branches reach into the future; but they are all part of one tree.

For that reason the duty to instruct our generations comes upon us all—parents, grandparents, and married couples without children, as well as single individuals in God's church. Which is to say that this text, together with the whole river of truth winding its way through Scripture, condemns all individualism.

From that point of view alone, the error both of the Baptists in rejecting the church membership and baptism of infants, and, closer to home, the same rejection of children in Christ's body by the Netherlands Reformed congregations in their teaching that all children are unbelieving and unregenerated, is a most serious and mischievous error. Their errors concerning God's covenant and the place of children in the church are grievous! We don't speak merely about a mistake concerning a speculative point of doctrine. Theirs is an error that so directly contradicts the spirit of the whole Bible, and of all Jehovah's precious promises and the covenant He established with Abraham and his seed to everlasting generations, that it must be considered an attack upon some of the most vital practical interests of the body of Christ, and an error that exerts a poisonous influence on the advance of Christ's spiritual kingdom. It is no less dangerous than the falsehood of presupposed regeneration—which we have been falsely accused of teaching, but which we vehemently condemn. Both give an erroneous basis for the Christian instruction of children.

If I may mix Old Testament perspective with New, our homes and our covenant schools and our fellowship with the children and youth of the church and our catechism teaching are not mission efforts to make true Israelites out of uncircumcised Philistines! The purpose of this instruction is not to make our covenant children into children of God. That would be a task far beyond our capability, and it would be hopeless even to attempt it.

Basically, the order is exactly the opposite. Because the Lord our God draws His seed out of our seed, it is both possible and necessary to instruct our children in His wonderful works and to teach them to keep His commandments. No, that does not assume that all shall be saved. Nor do those efforts save them. But it recognizes the obligation God lays upon us in that He is pleased that the seed of Christ be present—not head for head, but organically—in the generations of the church.

Though today the state forces us to educate the world's children by our tax dollars, and we do so in willing subjection, nevertheless, our obligation is not the instruction of the *world's* children, but the *church's* children. And would some within the church contribute toward the education of the world's children, but contribute nothing toward the education of the church's children?!

That obligation comes upon us, not by the force of society or the state, nor by mere necessity if our children are to succeed in life, but by Jehovah God.

Covenant education is not an option, but a mandate of which all church members are partakers. For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel. That testimony is a witness concerning the will of God. God commands us to instruct the church's children and grandchildren. And that testimony is at the same time a law, immovable and irreversible, the departure from which brings the wrath of God and severe chastisement.

Do we understand that? God's testimony concerning our obligation toward covenant instruction is not merely some pretty good advice, which you follow or do not follow depending on your priorities. It is not something that you may follow only as your money allows, or as you see fit. It is a mandate from Almighty God!

When you search the Scriptures you will find that same testimony and law often repeated. The words of [Deuteronomy 6:6-9](#) ^[2] are probably familiar to us: "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart. And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates."

This is the law Jehovah gave—not to fathers only, but to Israel, the church. Are you a member of Christ's church? Then this law comes to you. It comes to you upheld by the very words of Jesus recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke in their gospel accounts, where we read: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God." And again, "Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me."

It is our God-given calling to be living examples of godliness to the children of the church and to teach the generations to come.

That divine command applies to every area of life.

Yes indeed, it applies within the *church*. It is what motivates us to bring our children under the preaching of the gospel. It is what compels us to provide careful and faithful catechism instruction to the church's children and youth.

The same divine command applies to the instruction given in the home life of our children. This, of necessity, limits the involvement somewhat of those outside the immediate family. I say "somewhat," certainly not "entirely." Certainly the calling of the parents is emphasized within the sphere of the home. A man not interested in providing for the spiritual training of his own flesh and blood in the home will not serve to help instruct others either. To those whom God has given children, that faithful instruction of the generations begins right within the walls of their own household. That is why the man who will serve in the offices of the church and play a prominent role in such covenant instruction must, according to the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3 [3], rule well his own house. "For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?"

But that instruction of children within the home sphere is also contributed to by the other members of the church. When grandparents spend time with their grandchildren, testifying of God's wonder works of grace, when aunts and uncles speak unashamedly about their faith with their nephews and nieces, when church members speak to the children of the church, it leaves a profound impression upon the minds of those who are the spiritual seed of Israel. Worldliness likewise leaves an impression upon very impressionable minds, an impression that has a very detrimental effect upon this calling God has given the church.

But this divine command to instruct the generations of the church also applies more broadly beyond the sphere of the home to that of the school. Parents may, and wisely do, band together to form a school society and hire teachers to give instruction in various subjects. In doing such the parent does not transfer his own responsibility to the teacher. He only adds to his own. He still is responsible for that covenant training of the child whom God has entrusted to his care. But he adds to his responsibility because he now is also charged with seeing to it that the teacher he hires gives the instruction that God calls him to provide.

The interest in the children's covenant instruction, however, again reaches beyond father and mother when it comes to the sphere of the school. Here also the instruction of the church's children ought to be the interest of all church members.

Don't overlook the fact that the psalmist speaks in Psalm 78 [1] of *four generations!*

There are, first of all, the people speaking in the Psalm. This is one generation, the generation in which Asaph stood.

But those in whose place Asaph wrote this Psalm mention their *fathers* and speak of the fact that the words that came from the mouth of God are words that they heard from their fathers.

Furthermore, these same people speak of their *children*, the third generation. And they speak of their own obligation to teach their children the wonderful works of God and His truth.

And finally, they make mention of the fact that their children in turn "should arise and declare them to *their* children."

So the generations all together work for the education of the church's children. Young and old have a wonderful opportunity to contribute financial support to the covenant training of the church's children. Some can teach; some can help the teachers; others provide in other ways, including financially; and all pray. So we express the reality of the body of Christ, all parts standing in an inseparable connection with each other, working together toward the same goal.

Notice, the psalmist writes, "We will not hide them." The implication is that there are surely those who do hide them from their children. There are those in the church who hide the things of God from their children. Asaph wrote with such in mind. He would that we not be like them. "We will show to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done." Shall we? We?

Perhaps you ask, why should we, a couple with no children, a single man or woman, a father and mother whose children are grown up and through school, continue to support financially and with prayer the showing of God's praises to those children to whom I have no physical tie or relationship?

Why? The answer is and must be, Because you love God. He who loves God loves his brother also, writes the apostle John. And when you love your brother—which includes the church's children, those little brothers and sisters in Christ—then you will contribute to their heavenward sojourn, and do so with joy and even self-sacrifice. Do you love the church's children?

... to be continued.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Psalm+78>

[2] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Deuteronomy+6:6-9>

[3] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=I+Timothy+3>