

Question: In the Protestant Reformed community there are three institutions that dominate our lives: the church, the home, and the school. From a Reformed perspective, how do they relate to each other?

### **Church, Home, and School: One Source and an Eternal Purpose**

As Protestant Reformed believers, there are three institutions that dominate our lives: church, home, and school. These institutions do not rule us with an iron rod, as some in the world around us might suppose; rather, what is meant is that our lives are led and directed within these institutions. The institutions of the Protestant Reformed church, home, and school are blessings from God; they have been chosen by God as a picture of certain spiritual truths of God's covenant with us, his elect children. Additionally, these institutions comprise the sphere of the covenant, within which God sees fit to nurture his elect children. The doctrine of the covenant, as it is manifested in these three institutions, is made tangible and experiential to the Reformed believer. God's covenant is made manifest, through his grace and the Spirit, by our participation in and support of these institutions.

The first subject we will look at is the question of what an institution actually is. A close-fitting definition from Noah Webster's First Edition of the *American Dictionary of the English Language* is this: "A system, plan or society established, either by law or by the authority of individuals for promoting any object, public or social."<sup>1</sup> This definition, although not a perfect explanation, assists us in understanding what an institution is. In this definition, three important concepts are mentioned: the act of *establishing*, the *authority* required to establish, and the *objective* or *purpose* in establishing. In the first section, we will look into the act of establishing as well the authority required; in the subsequent section we will examine the purpose.

#### **God's Institutions**

The institutions we are considering (the church, home, and school) are all established by God. By virtue of being the creator, God himself has the authority to institute. God's purpose in creating the earth was that he might show forth his glory in the salvation of his elect through the work of Christ. Ephesians 1:4–5 speaks directly to this truth: we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. This precise number of the elect is the church proper. By his

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<sup>1</sup> Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (Facsimile of 1928 ed.), (San Francisco: Foundation of American Christian Education, 1967), s.v. "institution" 3.

promise of the Redeemer to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15, God established the church, the earthly manifestation of those whom he had determined to save. The church is an institution that belongs to the sphere of redemption. In the Old Testament, the church was made manifest in the line of promise: from Adam to Abraham and then to the nation of Israel. This earthly manifestation of the church is the church institute. In the New Testament, the church institute is no longer identified with the children of Abraham; the church institute is now the local congregation, “an assembly of those who are saved” as The Confession of Faith defines it.<sup>2</sup> John Calvin refers to the church institute as God’s “own institution”, and indeed, it is.<sup>3</sup>

After God had created, he instituted marriage by his act of bringing Eve to Adam; with marriage he instituted the home, as recorded in Genesis 2:18–24. Marriage is an institution that belongs to the sphere of creation. Genesis 2:24 is particularly clear about the construction of the home: Adam says, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” The construction of marriage between a man and a woman is clearly seen here, with the implication being that children are to be born into and raised within homes with both a father and a mother. One of the primary reasons for the breakdown of the biblical model of marriage in society is found in the widespread rejection of God’s literal six-day creation. If the world evolved, then God has no authority to institute marriage and the home; consequently, the evolving creatures would then have the authority to institute whichever type of family structure fits their purposes. This is certainly not the case!

As we observe the relationship between home and school, it is impossible to establish a division between God’s act of instituting the home from that of the school. For this reason and in our current context, it is correct to speak in terms of two institutions, namely, the church and the home. Genesis 2:24 tells us that children are to be raised by a father and mother in the home until the time of maturity. In order for a child to arrive at maturity, it is imperative that he or she be educated. Ephesians 6:4 commands fathers to “...bring them [their children] up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” This is what sets the good Christian schools apart from those of the world. The worldly schools are institutions of men and have a secular purpose at their core. Protestant Reformed parents make a vow at the baptism of their children “to see these children...instructed and brought up in the aforesaid doctrine, or help or cause them to be

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<sup>2</sup> *Confession of Faith*, Article 28, quoted in *The Psalter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Printing Company, 2002), 48

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.1.5, 2.1017

instructed therein, to the utmost of your power.”<sup>4</sup> God’s word commands that the children of believing parents receive a Christian education, and our baptismal vows reflect that.

### **God’s Eternal Purpose**

To establish more firmly in our minds the relationship between God’s institutions of church, home, and school, we must proceed to an examination of his purpose for them. The chief reason for which God instituted the church and home, with the school by implication, is to glorify himself. Specifically, as we have already seen earlier in God’s purpose for creating, God determined in eternity to glorify himself in the redemption of his elect in Christ. God establishes his covenant with his people, and he reveals himself to them as the covenant God. Psalm 25:14 states that “The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will show them his covenant.” The church, home, and school are means that God uses to nurture those with whom he has established his covenant, and there are specific ways in which each of these institutions manifests God’s covenant relationship with believers.

God’s work for the church institute is the preaching of the word, the administration of the sacraments, and the application of church discipline. God gathers his people by the preaching of the word, teaching them about himself. He encourages them by their partaking of the sacraments. God also corrects those whom he loves by disciplining them. Through both discipline and teaching, God defends his people from error in lifestyle and doctrine. The children of God are united together as one in a common confession of the truth. The church is the body, united in the Spirit, under Christ her head. The Apostle Paul writes of this in 1 Corinthians 12:27, where he writes: “Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” The context makes the meaning of this verse especially clear: there are many members, but only one body.

In the home, the husband and wife are to represent the relationship of Christ with the church. Ephesians 5:23 reads: “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the Savior of the body.” Marriage is a wonderful picture of the covenant fellowship that the church has with Christ; the husband and wife become one as Christ and the church are one. Marriage is one aspect of the family that is a reflection of the covenant, but the parent-child relationship is another that is well worth examining in this respect. Ephesians 1:5 says that God “...predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to

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<sup>4</sup> “Form for the Baptism of Infants”, quoted in *The Psalter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Printing Company, 2002), 88

himself, according to the good pleasure of his will". Even as children have earthly fathers who (ought to!) care for them, we have a heavenly Father who has redeemed us in Christ.

As pointed out earlier, in the institution of marriage and the home, God requires that parents train their children in the "nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). This is particularly the responsibility of fathers as the heads of their homes. As surely as God is our heavenly Father and makes himself known unto us, earthly fathers are to educate their children in the truth which God has revealed in His word. However, as the church is one, children are born not simply to covenant parents as individuals, but children are born into the church, within the sphere of the covenant. For this reason, education is not simply the responsibility of individual covenant fathers, but it is the responsibility of the covenant community. Upon this basis Protestant Reformed parents must tirelessly strive to establish and maintain the good Christian day schools, with the avowed intent of training covenant children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. God has determined to establish his covenant with the seed of believers in the way of covenant education.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

God is the author of the instituted church and of the home with the school. These are his institutions, established by the authority that he alone possesses as the creating and redeeming God. They serve his eternal purpose, the establishment of his covenant with the elect. It is true that these institutions operate in different ways and in different spheres within the life of the believer, but nonetheless, God's eternal purpose for them is the same: to establish the covenant with believers and their seed. This common purpose that God has for the church and home entails solemn obligations and responsibilities for believers.

Believers are to gather together in the church institute, manifesting their unity as the body of Christ. This unity must always be unity in the truth, as God has revealed it to us; in our Protestant Reformed Churches we are blessed to have this truth officially proclaimed to us from week to week. This preaching of the word includes Heidelberg Catechism instruction for the youth as well. May we never tire of this preaching nor neglect the gathering of ourselves together. In our churches, we are also encouraged by participating in the sacraments of baptism and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Finally, there is the admonition and discipline of the elders for our correction. We are to give thanks to God always for these blessings that the church alone has been given authority to administer.

God has made it clear in his word, that he works in the line of continued generations; passages such as Acts 2:39 and 1 Timothy 1:5 make this explicit. There is a great benefit to the children of believers in that they are raised within the sphere of the covenant, witnessing the godly marriages of their parents and being led by their godly example. This is not the exclusive way in which God works, but it is the ordinary. As children or young people being raised (or having been raised) in Godly homes, we must give thanks to God for this blessing! To subvert the authority which God has entrusted to parents is to despise the authority of God. Rebellion against one's parents is rebellion against God.

The school is an extension of the home; therefore, the same thanks we must give for Godly homes must be given to God for the good Christian schools. The authority that God has entrusted to covenant parents is present not only in the home, but in the school as well. Rebellion in the school is rebellion against God. Parents who slander or discredit the authority in the school subvert not only their own authority, but also the authority of other covenant parents, which is God's authority. Whether a parent, student, or simply a member of the covenant community, let us think about this before we open our mouths to criticize harshly those who diligently labor in our good Christian schools.

In summary, the church and the home with the school are God's institutions. They are established by God's work and under his authority. The believer spends his or her regenerated life participating in and supporting these institutions. These institutions comprise the sphere of the covenant; they must not be viewed as a bane and burden or worse yet, as a curse! These are God's means for raising up and preserving the Church. Let us give thanks to him!