

# Special Essay for Reformed Ecumenicity: A Covenantal Solution to Controversy

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God has set three institutions or necessary and integral organisations on the earth for the benefit of humankind: the family, the church and the state. In the history of the United Kingdom, as with most countries in the Western world, there have been many conflicts and wars because of a struggle between church and state for supremacy. In modern times the state has prevailed over the church, and has usurped many of the roles which were formerly in the domain of the church, such as education and welfare.

As life becomes more politicised, it would be an easy matter for the Christian to be swept along. This could create various tensions in our thought-life and sense of loyalty. One danger might be that we start to see the real Christian conflict as being fought in the realm of the state. Christian activism in politics, perhaps leading to “direct action” or seeking office as a Christian candidate within a larger “conservative” party, could come to be the only thing that has significance for us. We start to equate the name of Christ with a particular political cause, or think of good Christianity in terms of unqualified patriotism. On the other hand, some Christians have come to view the whole state system in itself as evil, and to be avoided by the truly “spiritual.” Instead, activity is directed towards various church or para-church duties exclusively.

What can be said about this church/state tension? Simply put, it should be resolved in favour of the church. First, *the church existed before the state and will exist after the state*. Immediately after the fall of humankind into sin God gave the promise of redemption and a covering from sin (Gen. 3:15, 21). This marks the message and mandate of the church, the state being only established somewhat later (9:5-6). Also, in the new heavens and new earth, national boundaries and civil functions will cease

to have their present significance, whereas the church will be commencing her perfected enjoyment of the conformable presence of God unto all eternity. Second, *the state exists for the sake of the church, rather than the other way around*. Christ has been given authority over all the nations of men in order that He might save His church within the world (Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 1:21,23; Is. 43:3-4). One of the purposes for the existence of the state is that a peaceful and amenable situation might be created in society for the efficient fulfilment of the work of the church.

However, in saying that the institution of the church is more important than the institution of the state is not to tell the whole story from a Christian perspective. Churches can be, have been, and are, tyrannical, just as civil governments. Various Protestant national churches have been as guilty of this at the time of the Reformation as the Roman Catholic church was during the Middle Ages. For example, various Protestant churches have been guilty of such tyrannical activities as making church membership obligatory rather than voluntary, proscribing and persecuting various smaller Protestant groups who dissented on secondary issues, punishing offenders against the church with civil sanctions, enforcing personal morality upon the masses, and banning certain legitimate cultural activities. Thankfully, such instances of tyranny are the exception within Protestantism rather than the rule.

Even this is not the whole picture. My key conviction and the central thesis of this essay is that *it is the institution of the family that is the fundamental institution of earthly life* both in the church and in the nation. The family is the only institution which has existed from creation and before the entrance of sin into the world. God established His covenant of grace by way of families in the Old Testament (Gen. 17:7; 18:17; Ps. 103:17-18; Jer. 32:38-40). New Testament churches also include the whole family (Matt. 19:14; 1 Cor. 7:14; Eph. 6:1; Rom. 11:16). God bases His church around the family unit, in terms of the church's salvation (Acts 2:39; 16:31), membership (Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16), and leadership (1 Tim. 3:4-5; Titus 1:6). Education (Eph. 6:4) and welfare (1 Tim. 5:4, 8, 16) are family rather than church matters.

It is instructive to note how the New Testament churches were located in households (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:14; Philem. 2), and divided up in terms of households (1 Cor. 16:15; Phil. 4:22; 2 Tim. 1:16; 4:19). Heresy entered into the church by way of households (2 Tim. 3:6; Titus 1:11), and was rejected at the same level (2 John 10). The same pattern existed for other problems in the church, such as persecution (Matt. 10:36; Acts 8:3) and gossip (1 Tim. 5:13). Teaching (Acts 5:42; 20:20) and even sacramental instruction (Matt. 26:18; Acts 2:46) was administered from and to households. The place of women in the church and society was understood by first placing her in the correct standing with regard to the household (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-15; 5:14 - 1 Cor. 11:3, 8-9; Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1, 4, 6). The Christian church as a whole is even designated in terms of a household (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15).

All this, of course, is nothing more than a continuation of the teaching of the Old Testament on the matter (e.g. Gen. 7:1; Josh. 24:15; Ps. 127:1). And that is the point. What has been sketched above is not some dispensational blip that is here today and gone tomorrow, or an arbitrary pattern which exists only at the surface level of a few texts of Scripture. Rather, *it is the way God works out His plan with the whole human race in all ages*. Again, this is not the case only because God sovereignly chose to act in this way according to His own secret council for reasons we cannot fathom. *God works for and through and in a family unit because this is a reflection of who God is in Himself as Triune*. God is a divine “family” within Himself as Father and Son with their Holy Spirit. What I want to do for the remainder of the article is to use this trinity-as-family understanding of God to examine and illuminate various theological controversies in an attempt to move divided Christians closer together by means of what they already have in common: the doctrine of God as “family.”

**First**, there is the controversy over the doctrine of infant baptism. “Should the infants of believers receive the sacrament of baptism and thus be admitted into the church of Jesus Christ?” This is the way the question is usually phrased. The way the central question in a theological

controversy is phrased has great power in shaping the way the question is answered as it sets the direction of approach, the boundaries of thought and the very language of the controversy itself. When phrased like this, the average Christian is forced to look upon the whole notion of infant baptism as a strange and illogical thing. After all, aren't the sacraments of the church only for the already initiated? Isn't the church an assembly of individual believers? And how do you know if a particular infant believes or not (assuming they can) before they make a profession? Surely you don't think that the faith of parents is imputed to all their children, especially when there are so many examples of rebellious children in the Bible and our own experience?

Given all that I have written above about the place of the family in Scripture, there are many different and better ways to phrase the whole question of infant baptism, ways which remove it of its alien savour. Should the sign of the covenant be administered to those in descending generations who are the children of that covenant? Does God in Scripture establish and maintain His covenant with individuals or corporate bodies such as families? In the New Testament, is the sacrament of baptism applied to households or only to individuals? Given the Old Testament practice of circumcision, which was corporately and inter-generationally administered, would the primitive Jewish Christians have considered infant baptism a strange or a natural thing? But perhaps this is the one question our antipaedo-baptist friends should ask themselves above all: what does the practice of baptising only individual adults signify about the nature of the relationship between God as Father and Son? It signifies that these distinctions of diversity and relationship are secondary or even peripheral to the character of God. It teaches, first of all, that God is only an individual and not a family. It also teaches that God deals with His people as individuals and not as families. These ramifications are not of the abstract, theoretical sort which may be easily dismissed by a Baptist as conjecture or argument-by-distant-implication. They lie at the very heart of Baptist sacramental *practice*. They are what the isolated rite of adult baptism *means*. They are the *unspoken sermon* concerning the nature of God and God's salvation that is preached every time an infant is refused baptism.

Dear Baptist brethren: flee from the error of Unitarianism in your practice, presuppositions and presentation as well as your dogma!

**Second**, there is the controversy over the ordination of woman to positions of leadership and oversight in the Christian church. Arguments are made for this practice on the basis that the difference in authority between male and female was a result of the fall into sin rather than a creation ordinance, and therefore is to be overcome by the Christian church rather than perpetuated. Further, the New Testament itself teaches that in Christ there is no longer any distinction between male and female (Gal. 3:28). Where Paul in his writings seems to contradict this overriding theological truth of sexual equality and identity, it is because he was a product of his patriarchal times at best or a chauvinist at worst.

Apart from resulting from an unorthodox doctrine of inspiration and some terrible exegesis, these arguments start to crumble when faced with the true doctrine of the family. To start with, within the family of the Trinity there is *both* equality of persons *and* subordination of order and roles - hence the Son is subject to the Father while being of one substance with the Father. This shows that there is nothing inherently sinful about being in a position of authority or being subject to authority, and that there is nothing logically contradictory between the principles of equality in Christ and submission within a society. Also, the fact that this is how God is within Himself implies that this is how things are in the created order also, for the works of God reflect who God is. Subordination within a family structure is not a result of the fall but exists in the very nature of things because this is how the Creator lives within Himself.

The Bible explicitly and clearly teaches that females are to be subordinate to their male heads within the context of the family. This means that wives are to be submissive to their husbands, and that daughters are to be submissive to their fathers (as should sons, too, showing that authority structures in the Bible are not simply gender based). How does this relate to the question of ordination in the church? *Male headship in the family directly and necessarily implies male leadership in the church.* It has already

been noted how, in early New Testament times, the church was really an extension of the Christian household. Just as several congregations come together in association now to form a “denomination,” so then the local church was a conglomeration of various families who united for the purpose of forming the institution of a church.

To view the matter like this helps us to understand the non-arbitrary nature of God’s clear instructions that only males should serve as elders and deacons. When female ordination is opposed by us - as it should be - it is not opposed just because “the Bible says so” (although this should be sufficient, even if we understood no further). Rather, when the church is placed in its familial background, as an outgrowth and continuation of the covenant Christian family, our refusal to ordain females makes perfect Biblical sense. What would be the logic of insisting upon male headship in the home only to deny it in that corporate extension of the home that is the Christian church? Conversely, we can see why denying the headship of man in the church will always lead back to an eroding away of the headship of man in the family, and thus to all others areas of society.<sup>1</sup>

**Third**, there is the controversy over the idea of Christian education. In Northern Ireland, the education of children was a parochial matter until the 1920’s when the Protestant churches gave up authority of their schools to the then “Protestant” state. Now, to talk about “Christian education” has two main connotations in the United Kingdom. First, it might refer to “denominational” schools, such as the Roman Catholic schools in Northern Ireland or the Anglican schools left in England. Second, to those who are used to thinking only in terms of state education, talk of “Christian education” means supporting Christians who are in the establishment of state education (teachers and students)

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<sup>1</sup>For those who wish to examine this sort of argument in closer detail, I recommend an article written by Vern Sheridan Poythress entitled, “The Church as Family: Why Male Leadership in the Family Requires Male Leadership in the Church”, published in a book edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem called *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Crossway Books, 1991), pp. 233-247.

or standing up for the Christian religion in the subject of Religious Education within state schools. But are any of these applications of the phrase correct? What is real Christian education?

Before this question may be answered, another one must be asked. *Where* is real Christian education? That is, who has responsibility and authority for teaching children? The church or the state? According to the Bible, neither the church nor the state has the right to educate children, but only the parents of the children, and those to whom they choose to represent them. Education is therefore a family matter, and should be parentally controlled and supervised. This does not mean that parents must do all the teaching themselves. They might not have the specialist knowledge or skills necessary to equip their children with sufficient levels of educational competence in all the required areas. It does mean, however, that parents must be active, interested and involved in the education of their children. They must know *what* is being taught, *how* it is being taught, and by *whom*. It is their responsibility to learn about and exercise control over these matters. The school is, after all, nothing more than an expansion of the family, or better, an adaptation of the family for the specific purpose of education.

The familial nature of education has, I believe, direct implications not only for who is in control of the educational environment, but the sort of education that is provided within it. Traditional education was naïvely perceived in former generations as being nothing more than the passing on of certain brute facts within an spiritually neutral environment. Now that this context has altered in recent years from a broadly theistic one to a aggressively post-Christian alternative, it has become clear that all facts exist within a system of interpretation from which they take their meaning, purpose and value. Further, the life of a Christian family consists of far more than solely academic matters, but involves vocation, ethics, finance, leisure, discipline, worship and the whole world of Christian experience. All this needs to be reflected in any education that purports to be based around the family. Therefore, the nature of the education provided in a Christian school should be a *world-view*

*education*, encompassing all things from a Christian perspective, and equipping the students to live a full Christian life in this world to the glory of God.

**Fourth**, there is the controversy over Christian attitude to and involvement in politics. As far as I can determine, there seem to be at least four popular positions which Christians take up with regard to how they view the subject of politics. First, there are the separatists, who believe that the political realm is either sinful or irrelevant. The first attitude was found in the radical Anabaptists of the Reformation, while the second is associated with modern dispensationalism, the heirs of the Anabaptists, who prophesy nothing but immediate and inevitable doom for the world, and so classify all concern for the state a waste of time. Second, there are the pluralists, an increasingly popular group, who believe that no one standard of ethics applies in the civil realm, but that a country ought to base its laws on the various divergent codes of those who are its citizens. Third, there are those called theocrats. Technically, this view is associated with Islam and Roman Catholicism, but it may be applied to any professedly Christian group who believe in the Christianisation of a country by the power of the sword in a revolution, and is usually mixed up with some form of ardent nationalism.

A fourth view is the one I am suggesting here, which I will call *covenantalism*. The defining characteristic of this position is not indifference, compromise or disobedience, as with the other three groups respectively, but *concern for the life of the Christian family within the state*. As Christians whose lives are necessarily bound up with the state while on this earth, our political concerns should be shaped not by eschatological escapism, post-modern relativism or misguided patriotism, but *by what impedes us from or helps us towards the maintaining godly households*. Such concentration on the institution of the family should provide us with a set of priorities in judging political relevance.

At the top of our political concern, therefore, should be those policies which affect the day to day running of a Christian family, such as

education,<sup>2</sup> corporal punishment, tyrannical taxation of and state interference in the family (i.e. socialism and the welfare state, which are unbiblical notions), and law and order issues (which relate to the defence of the family). Next, there are those moral issues that attack the family as an idea or institution (e.g. pornography, lax divorce laws, the permission of homosexual “marriage”, and abortion). Questions of constitutional technicalities, flags and emblems, and devolution, are in themselves secondary, and only important insofar as they influence those matters mentioned above. The same goes for the modern obsession with various “political correctness” issues (e.g. race relations, the environment, and asylum seekers). Ironically, those “civic” issues which we Reformed believers tend to spend most of our time debating turn out to possess merely an academic rather than authentic significance (i.e. imposition of Sabbath laws, the question of rebellion, the status of Old Testament civil laws, the establishment principle, and the status of the national covenants of the second Reformation period).

In conclusion, I would insist that the Christian idea of the family is one of the most neglected yet central and desperately needed doctrines of today. Preachers need to speak about it, parents need to think about it and all concerned persons need to act upon it. One positive benefit among many others of strenuously promoting this doctrine is that it will pay positive dividends towards the promotion of biblical ecumenicity by correctly prioritising our distinctives and providing a larger paradigm within which disagreements may be rethought and resolved.

*This article was authored by Allen Baird, editor of the British Reformed Journal, who completed his PhD thesis on the doctrine of the Trinity.*

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<sup>2</sup>It is my opinion that the very best thing we as Christians could do for the good of our countries is not to expend our energies lobbying politicians and trying to influence parties, but to support the cause of Christian education. Although Christian education is first of all an obligation for Christian parents in terms of their own children, it also brings positive benefits to the state at large, such as promoting biblical notions of limited government, physical chastisement and vocation.