

The Reformed Family: Parents and Children

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Introduction

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of our subject: parents and children. In view of the ignoring and minimizing of the subject both by the state and in the churches, it is necessary strongly to assert its importance. The family is of fundamental importance for the state or what I may call the earthly kingdom. Many of the most serious troubles of the United States and of all the other nations of the West are the direct result of the breakdown of the family. That sin is folly as well as rebellion is evident from the fact that the rulers and the citizens of the earthly kingdom not only fail to recognize this fundamental truth, but also actively promote the destruction of family. Thus the earthly kingdoms commit national suicide.

God has made family of fundamental importance also to the spiritual kingdom, that is, the church. This is evident from the inclusion of the family in the New Testament church. The end of Ephesians 5 makes marriage an important element of the life of the congregation. The first part of Ephesians 6 recognizes the reality of parents and children as an essential building-block of the church. Just as family was a basic element of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, so it is of the New Testament church.

That family is of fundamental importance to the spiritual kingdom is evident also from God's attitude towards attacks on the family in Malachi 2. The evil in Judah was attack on family. Because of this evil, God refused to accept Judah's public worship: "he regardeth not the offering any more" (v. 13). This is a warning to the churches of our day that are destroying family in exactly the same way that Judah was destroying it in Malachi's time. The worship of these churches is in vain. In Malachi 2:16, God declared that He hates the attack on the family: "he hateth putting away," where "putting away" is divorce.

Despite its fundamental importance to both the earthly and the spiritual kingdoms, indeed, because of its importance, the family is under attack both

in the state and in the church. The attack is launched by Satan. The family needs to be defended. The attack on the family occurs on many fronts. It takes the form of sexual promiscuity. Sex belongs to marriage, and marriage is the heart and foundation of family. It takes the form of outright dismissal of family as outdated. It takes the form of the attempt to reconstruct family as legitimately the “marital” relation of males with males and females with females: homosexuality. It takes the form especially of prevalent, indeed, accepted, divorce and remarriage.

These attacks are powerful in the churches, as well as in ungodly society. The war of the ages becomes more fierce, and threatening, and close to home. The apostasy of the churches develops. True churches and genuine Christians are called by God to hold the traditions, now with regard to the family.

Nature

If we are to grasp the nature of the family—what the family essentially is—we must remind ourselves of the institution of the family by God in the beginning. Incidentally, this underscores the necessity of viewing Genesis 1 and 2 as history. Among the other deadly implications and effects of regarding these opening chapters in Scripture as myth is that the churches lose confidence in viewing the account of the institution of marriage as authoritative. What stands out in all the account in Genesis 1 and 2 is the remarkable oneness of the family, that is, that the members of the family are a unity. It is true of the family what the Reformed Lord’s Supper Form says of the church that is joined to Christ in the Supper: many members joined together as one body.¹ The comparison holds because God created the family to symbolize the church.

In the beginning, the husband, Adam, and his wife, Eve, were “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). The reference is not only to sexual intimacy, although the one flesh expresses itself uniquely in this intimacy. But the oneness is also the unity of their complete human nature, soul and body. Two individuals, with differ-

¹ “Form for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper,” in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), p. 271.

ent persons and personalities, share one human life. This comes to expression especially in the sexual embrace of marriage, in which there is oneness, not only of body but also of soul. In all their life together, there is oneness of the totality of life.

Basic to this “one flesh” is that Eve was made from a rib of Adam. The woman and the man were one in that they shared the “stuff” of humanity, ultimately the dust of the ground as formed and breathed into by the Creator. Eve was the female Adam.

Ordinarily, family consists also of children and children are formed from the flesh of the two parents, according to the wise providence of God. They are extensions of their parents. There is, therefore, a remarkable oneness of children with their parents. In their own way, they share the one flesh of father and mother, as becomes evident not only in their physical appearance but also in their psychological traits. This phenomenal likeness of children to their parents is intended by God to symbolize the spiritual likeness of His children—believers in Jesus Christ—to Himself, that is, the image of God.

Nevertheless, the remarkable oneness of family is not sameness, is not identity of persons: oneness is not sameness. The wife is not the same as the husband. She is not the same person; she is not the same in personality. She is and remains—and ought to remain—a completely different person. She has radically different characteristics or qualities, both of body and of soul. Hers are the distinctive characteristics of the female. We may sum them up as femininity, in contrast with masculinity. It is grievous sin against the Creator, therefore, as well as against the mate, to say nothing of a foolishness that ruins the marital relationship, that a husband or wife forces the other to be the same as him or her.

Likewise, the children are not the same as each other or the same as their parents. They are different persons. However much they may resemble their parents, they have their own individual features or characteristics, not only of body but also of soul. Whereas the parents may be easygoing and deliberate, the child may be excitable and quick to decide and act. Whereas the parents may be qualified for, capable of, and interested in manual labour, the child may be utterly disinterested in working with his hands but interested instead in the work of the mind.

This was a striking difference between the present writer and his father. His father worked with his hands, able to fix anything and, as a farmer, skilled in all the manual labour demanded by this calling. This was his interest, his joy, the passion and labour and satisfaction that contributed to forming his humanity. His son had little interest in, or ability for, that kind of work. Reading and study were his love, already in his youth. His father wondered about him, lacking as he did the natural make-up of the father, but never imposed his personal qualities on him. He allowed his son to be what he naturally was. His son had only respect and admiration for the kind of man his father was, and for his skills.

Family is oneness, but it is the oneness of different persons and the oneness of different—sometimes radically different—personalities. It is the oneness of a male husband and a female wife. It is the oneness of several children, all different persons, with sometimes strikingly different personalities and interests. It is the oneness of parents, with all the qualities and position of parents, and their children, with all the differences of children from parents.

The nature of the oneness of family as created by God, therefore, is not sameness or identity but fellowship or communion of life. By fellowship is meant the sharing in love of one life by different persons and, in the case of family, sharing one life in a uniquely intimate way. Fellowship is not something we create. It is a way of life that God creates, and something we enter into when we marry and when we have a child or are born into as a child. The fellowship of family is like being blessed with, and entering into, the fellowship with Christ and with the other members of the church, when we are born again and believe. We certainly become active in this fellowship with Christ and with the other members of the church, but originally fellowship is bestowed on us; we are blessed with it as a gift. Each shares in and contributes to this fellowship in his or her own unique manner.

So it is with regard to the fellowship of the family. In this fellowship of family is, and is intended by God to be, delight, safety, help and fulfilment. There is delight. Between husband and wife is the sheer joy of the marital relation, including, but not limited to, the sexual relationship. Children delight in all the friendly life of the family, with their parents and with each other.

There is safety. How precious to a child is the security of a solid family, anchored in a solid marriage of father and mother! But no one should underestimate the blessing of safety in a good, Christian family also for the husband and the wife. If anyone doubts the importance of this sense of security for the husband and the wife, let him consider the devastation worked upon the husband or the wife when the mate is unfaithful. In part, the safety of fellowship in marriage is the help that each gives the other. Genesis 2:18 calls the wife the “help” meet, that is, fit, for Adam. By implication, every wife is called to be “help” to her husband. By its description of the real marriage of Christ and the church and by its proclamation of the help that Christ has given to His bride, Ephesians 5 calls every husband to be such a help to his wife.

Then also, in the fellowship of the Christian family, each member finds his or her own fulfilment as a human—as a godly human. In marriage, the man and the woman do not sacrifice something of their fulfilment, but find the fullness of it. The husband makes his wife the complete woman she becomes in the marriage. What would the man be without the help of his wife? Half of what he became by her help! With regard to the influence of family on children, what would I have been without the influence of the godly, pious family in which I was reared? There is something mysterious, even mystical, about family and its fellowship.

The opposite of fellowship is “aloneness,” with its accompanying loneliness. I know that Paul defends, and even praises, being unmarried and, therefore, without family in I Corinthians 7. This was sacrifice on behalf of special devotion to the Lord. Paul’s recommendation of the single life in I Corinthians 7 applies to the Christian who has the blessing of fellowship with Christ and with the members of the church. Such a one is not bereft, therefore, of fellowship. In addition, singleness is not the rule but very much the exception in the church.

God Himself said, at the creation, that it is not good that man be alone. He created us for fellowship—for marriage and family. The reason, ultimately, is the very being and nature of God: He is not a God of loneliness but the God of fellowship in Himself. He is three Persons, with distinctive personalities, sharing one life and, indeed, one being. He is the family God, the God of family fellowship: Father and Son in the Holy Ghost. This nature of family by God’s design prescribes how the family and its members conduct themselves, their life together.

Life

Fundamental to the right and blessed life together of the human family is the fellowship of the members of this family with God in Jesus Christ. Without this, the members will not live rightly with each other in the family. The result will be division, chaos and ruin. God is the bond of unity of the human family.

The evidence is at hand. There is, first, the division in the first family on account of their separation from God. Eve betrayed her husband with the forbidden fruit. She was not a help to him. Adam then was quick to blame Eve, thus giving her over, as he would have supposed, to the punishment of God: “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me” (Gen. 3:12). The first child born into the first family murdered his brother (Gen. 4).

Second, the blessing of the covenant family in Psalm 128 is rooted in the fear of Jehovah and has its source in Jerusalem, that is, in the church in which God dwells and from which He dispenses this blessing.

Third, according to Ephesians 5:22-33, the headship of the husband in marriage is the reflection of Christ’s headship of the church, which reflection is the gracious work of the Holy Ghost. Similarly, the wife’s submission to her husband is a reflection of the church’s subjection to Jesus Christ by the Spirit of Christ.

The fellowship of godly marriage flourishes in the sphere of fellowship with God, which is the covenant of grace, as the bond of friendship with God. Close to God, we are close to each other in our marriage. We ought to live close to God simply for God’s sake and, when we do, He blesses us with additional benefits, not least of which is intimate, blissful marriage and family. This is still possible in a sinful world and between two humans with sinful natures!

The same is true with regard to the fellowship of children and parents. Ephesians 6:1-3 calls children to live peacefully with their parents “in the Lord.” Thus and thus only, that is, in the Lord Jesus Christ, do covenant children obey their parents, which makes for fellowship in the parent/child relationship.

If our relation to God is fundamental for the family, lively membership in a true church is required—required for the welfare of the family. God is present in the church, by His word and by the sacraments. There, we have fellowship

with God; there, He blesses us as husbands, wives, parents and children, that is, as family. Psalm 128 sings that Jehovah blesses the family “out of Zion” (v. 5), which is the New Testament church. Ephesians 5:22-6:4, which is one of the outstanding passages in Scripture on the family, appears in the great epistle on the church. Family belongs to the church. Family enjoys the communion and blessing of God in the church.

Turn your back on the church and you hazard your family. Sit loosely to the true church and God is likely to sit loosely to your family.

The fellowship of the family has a definite structure. The fellowship with each other of the various members of the family is not haphazard but ordered, just as is the case with the fellowship of the church and her members with Jesus Christ. Fundamental to this structure is that the members of the family love each other, not only with the love of blood, of earthly ties and of a common nature, although these are certainly aspects of family-love. God does not dispense with the earthly and natural, but takes them up into the spiritual. But the love for each other of the Christian family is, above all, a love for God’s sake. It is a love that counts the others dear as neighbours uniquely closely bound to one another by God Himself.

But this love, which is fundamental to family life, does not remain vague and undefined. It is not and does not remain a mere feeling. It takes form in specific, concrete behaviour. Family-love has its life, a life that is structured. For the husband, this life is that he is head of his wife, giving direction, guiding and providing, but not as he pleases; rather, he is head as Christ is head of His church (Eph. 5). He governs wisely, for the good of his wife and children. He governs sacrificially, as Christ sacrificed Himself for the church. He governs soundly, according to the will of God in Scripture and not according to his own pleasure. He will not govern tyrannically, abusively. An abusive husband is not the head of his wife. He is her brutal dictator, a harsh slave-master. By his godly headship, the Christian husband will win the submission of the wife and the obedience of the children, by the grace of God.

The structure of family life with regard to the Christian wife consists of her deliberate subjection of herself to the authority of her husband. She recognizes his headship. She helps him, by submission. This submission is not grudging

but a submission in love, as is true of the church's submission to Christ. The submission of their mother to the authority of their father has an effect upon the children regarding their own submission to their parents. This calling of the Christian woman is not the outdated notion of a patriarchal time but the Word of God in Ephesians 5 to believing wives in all times.

The love of parents for their children takes the form of the rearing of them "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). This consists of teaching, discipline, example of life, instruction at home not only in the Bible and the faith, but also concerning the entire body of Christian doctrine and the whole range of life in the world. As mention of the "whole range of life in the world" indicates, the Christian rearing of the children requires good Christian schools, as Article 21 of the Reformed "Church Order" of the Synod of Dordt states, "The consistories shall see to it that there are good Christian schools in which the parents have their children instructed according to the demands of the covenant."²

According to Colossians 3:21, a special danger to be avoided by parents is provoking the children to anger, lest they be discouraged. Parents provoke their children by unreasonable demands, usually in the interests of the parents, not of the children; by unnecessary or unfair discipline, a discipline administered in unrestrained parental wrath, and too severe; and by favouritism among the children. The evil is that the child becomes discouraged or, as is the original Greek, "broken in spirit." Like God with His children, we should desire spirited fellowship with our children, doing justice to the different personalities of them all and encouraging each one to be fully the person God has made him or her to be. This makes family-life interesting, even exciting.

For children, the structure of love in the family is chiefly obedience to parents, rising from their honour of them (Eph. 6:1-3). Ephesians 6:2-3 quotes and applies to children in the New Testament the fifth commandment of the Decalogue, which proves that the children of believers are included in the new covenant, just as children were included in the dispensation of the covenant in the Old Testament. Ephesians 6:1-3 is the refutation of the Baptist exclusion of the children of believers from the new covenant. Inasmuch as children,

² "Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches," in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, p. 387.

already as soon as they can understand the command to obey (which is very early childhood), are “in the Lord” and, therefore, are able to obey out of love for God, it is evident that God saves the children of believers from their earliest childhood. Therefore, the sign of baptism is rightfully theirs. And this is to say that believers’ children are part of the Christian family from their birth.

What a blessed, blissful life is the Reformed family, living in the love of God and of each other. And what a witness to the world with its broken homes, its hatred for each other by husband and wife, and its rebellious children.

This is not to deny or ignore that the Reformed family is threatened today by grave, powerful evils. There is the evil of the neglect of their marriage and home by husbands and wives who are also parents. They do not work at the biblical structure of their marriage and home. Family relations are permitted to develop like Topsy. Money and fun take precedence over the family. Much of the life of the members of the family takes place outside the home and in separation from each other. Neglect results in disorder. There is no government of his family by the head.

Another evil endangering the Christian family is ongoing conflict between husband and wife, conflict that is experienced by the children to their great distress. Husband and wife allow their differences to develop into anger, and their anger into hatred. They do not settle their differences away from the children, and quickly. They disobey the apostle’s injunction, “Let not the sun go down upon your wrath,” an admonition addressed to all Christians concerning all relationships but an admonition that is especially important regarding marriage (Eph. 4:26).

The children’s jealousy of each other threatens the life of the Christian family. Children themselves must resist the temptation to yield to this sin. God has made some children more gifted than others. God gives one child a more responsible and honourable position in church or in society than others. God burdens one child with more severe troubles than the others. Reformed family life calls the children to put to death the “green-eyed monster” of jealousy and to live in love with their brothers and sisters, regardless of the differing circumstances of earthly life. All are family. All are Christian family. It is immediately evident how this calling of the members of earthly families applies to the members of the spiritual family, the church.

Parents must be careful not to incite jealousy among their children. They do this by noticeably favouring one child over the others. Jacob was guilty of this by his favouring Joseph over his brothers. “Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours” (Gen. 37:3). This occasioned the hatred of Joseph by his brothers, resulting eventually in their selling him into Egypt, with all the anguish this caused Joseph and his father. The prevention of such favouritism is the parents’ viewing their children as alike precious, blood-bought, Spirit-indwelt children of the covenant of grace. This is the important truth about the children. The differing earthly characteristics of the children fade into relative insignificance.

Undoubtedly the most destructive threat to the Reformed, Christian family is the divorce or infidelity of husband and wife. This strikes at the very foundation of the family. It separates husband and wife. But it also destroys the children. In Malachi 2, God hates divorce or “putting away,” as the prophet expresses it, because Jehovah “seek[s] a godly seed” (v. 15). The divorce of his wife by a husband, or of her husband by a wife, destroys the children of the family. If a Reformed man and his wife have wickedly allowed their marriage to degenerate to such a degree, and their thinking to come to such a low spiritual condition that nothing else motivates them, they ought to resolve to stay together for the sake of the children. Then, of course, confessing their sin, they ought to exert themselves to restore their love for each other, by the grace of God, who does still today perform such miracles.

Our day sees a concerted attack upon the family, both in Western society at large and in the sphere of the Christian church. Many in the state and in the church fail vigorously to defend the family. This is foolish because the family is of fundamental importance for both the state and the church.

Importance for State and Church

Family is of vital importance to the state and society. Family is, after all, an institution that belongs to civil society, not only to the church. God created the family for the earthly life of the human race, before there was a church. If Adam had not sinned, the human race would have become one huge family of

children and grandchildren, ruled by father and grandfather Adam and cared for by mother and grandmother Eve. Still today, in a fallen human race, the family is the basic unit of every nation and of all society, whether for good in its relative maintenance or for ill in its abandonment.

The importance of the family for the state is mostly evident today by the evils that are the effects of the breakdown of the family, at least in Western society. What evils result from the breakdown of the family! Disorder in society! The suffering especially of women and children! Billions of pounds or dollars for welfare! Gangs in the cities and elsewhere! Schools that do not educate! Innumerable, overcrowded jails! The epidemic of the destruction of youths by drugs!

And still the foolish world not only refuses to recognize the importance of the family but also promotes its demise. In my own county, the United States, the media mock the (“traditional”) family. (And with the consequent evils, God mocks the media.)

As for the importance of the family for the church, God honours His marvellous institution, the family, by taking it up into the church, His spiritual kingdom. He has redeemed the family. He forms it, preserves it and defends it by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

God binds husband and wife, parents and children, and children and children together in fellowship; renders the fellowship a living reality in love; and orders and structures that love in obedience to His will for every member of the family. God forgives the sins and faults of the members of the Reformed family. He has mercy on covenant families. Even though parents come far short of their calling in rearing their children and in living with each other according to the pattern of Ephesians 5, their family flourishes by God’s grace.

He makes the enjoyment of family life part of our salvation. He causes good family life to symbolize the family life of Jesus Christ and His church. He gathers and rears to Christian maturity His elect children in the families of believers. Therefore, we have a high calling to defend and promote the family. And we are confident that the family is safe among us—under attack but safe.