

Three Treasures, One Goal

(The following is a slightly amended version of an address delivered at the AGM of the John Calvin School Association by Rev. C. Kleyn. Those things that had reference to specifics have been deleted, and an alteration or two has been made to reflect the understanding of the EPC re. the covenant. When the writer speaks of the Reformed Confessions and identifies them, we may apply what is said to our own Westminster Confession, which gathers them up, expands upon them, and testifies to the same Reformed faith. We hope this excellent speech, in its article format, will be of real encouragement to our readers to strive for the establishment and maintenance of truly Reformed schools in our congregations. Though this goal may not be possible for us at the present, let us never lose sight of it, or cease to pray and work towards it. Ed. Rev. Chris Connors).

Introduction

Three Treasures, one Goal. That's the title I have chosen for my address. What are those three treasures, I am referring to? You may immediately think of the triangle: home, church and school. Those three are often mentioned together in addresses on Reformed Education. Biblical education involves the triangle of home, church and school. All three should work together in harmony, serving the same ultimate goal.

But that is not what I intend to speak about tonight under the title: Three Treasures, one Goal. The First Treasure - The Word of God

The first treasure I wish to mention is the Word of God. God Almighty, our Creator and Redeemer has spoken to us. God has entrusted His written Word to us. An invaluable treasure. A lamp for our feet and a light for our path. No quicksand; but a solid basis on which to stand and work. A trustworthy guide. For this Word comes from God, who is the truth Himself, on whom you can always depend: The LORD our God, who is and remains the same. Thus the Bible gives certainty, firmness, direction. What a treasure in our age of uncertainty!

Today we are living in an age of constant change. Everything seems to be on the move. Everything is being questioned. Today people just think, feel and act differently to what was customary a few decades ago. We are living in what is called a post-modern age. And post-modernism rejects that there is any absolute truth. Everything is relative. Nothing is really certain. The truth is subjective. It is a matter for each individual to decide for himself. Thus nobody is really wrong and everybody is ultimately right. One idea is as good as another. The only criteria for adopting a particular idea is individual feelings.

Applied to Scripture this means: every interpretation of Scripture is considered to be legitimate. Don't you dare say that someone else is wrong in his interpretation. This relativism is also reflected in moral issues: "you decide what is good for you." "What is right for one person might not be right for someone else. Who are we to judge?"

In such a relativistic climate the only remaining virtue is tolerance. There must be an absolute toleration of other people's thoughts and morals.

Well, this is the climate in which we live, in this post-modern age. This results in a lot of uncertainty. Many just don't know what to think and what to do any more. This also becomes evident when parents are to pass on values to their children. When parents don't see things all too clearly and sharply any more, what are they going to pass on to their children? Thus many don't dare to say much to their children and just let them go their own way.

light in a dark world: A solid anchorage in a fleeting life. The truth is not dependent on our personal feelings, which come and go. Nor is the truth dependent on our personal experiences. The Word is the truth. Indeed, God has given us feelings. Our experiences fall under God's providence. Yet on their own they are not clear. We need the light of God's Word to see how we are to assess them. In order to see which of those feelings and experiences are from Him and which are sinful. His Word is the only norm. It tells us who God is, who we are, what the purpose of the world and history is etc,etc. God lets His light shine in all areas of life.

How thankful we can also be with the Reformed confessions, in which the churches upheld the truths of Scripture, often overagainst the lies of Satan. In our age of relativism we can expect people to criticise us for maintaining the confessions of the church and even mentioning them in the mission statement of the school. How outdated and irrelevant, they suggest. Yet it is something we treasure. Because we treasure the whole Word of God. And in those confessions we do nothing but defend that Word of God. When you treasure the whole Word of God, you will not accept distortions of the truth, but you will refute them with the Word of God. That was necessary in the past. It is also necessary today. Old heresies just keep coming back in a new cloak. We need to take a definitive stand against them. And we can, because the Word is absolute truth.

How valuable the Belgic Confession is, for example, when it relates what Scripture says about the creation of man, our fall into sin, our redemption and sanctification. How valuable the Canons of Dordt are in recording the triumph of God's

grace, despite the impotence and unwillingness of man and in defending the sovereignty of God. The five points of Calvinism, Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and the Perseverance of the saints, are fundamental to our faith. They give God the glory according to Scripture. In our age of relativism they form a beautiful and clear response to modern Pelagianism and Arminianism, which is rife also among many evangelical Christians. In this "me-culture"™ it is so easy to give credit to myself, when I should be giving credit to God.

But, enough on this issue. God's Word, as confessed in the Reformed Confessions, is the first treasure I wished to mention.

But now the goal: three Treasures, one Goal.

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What is the ultimate goal of God's Word? Why did God reveal Himself to us in Scripture? Ultimately He did this for His glory. That we might honour and praise Him. In Lord's Day 47, the first petition, "Hallowed be your name", is explained as follows (note: your name is God's self-revelation): "Grant us first of all that we may rightly know you, and sanctify, glorify and praise you in all your works, in which shine forth your almighty power, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, mercy and truth." This is a beautiful description of the goal God had in view when He made Himself known to us. The Second Treasure - The Covenant Children

What makes our children so special? Not just that they are our flesh and blood. Even though that naturally means a lot to us. They are part of us, we have strong emotional ties with them. In that sense already they are very special to us.

But they are still more special. Not because of something in them, or because of natural qualities or abilities. No, by nature they are no different to other children. When they were baptised, we confessed they were "conceived and born in sin and therefore subject to all sorts of misery, even to condemnation." They share in the depravity of mankind. Let's not kid ourselves.

[1]What is then so special? What God has done with them. God has placed them in His covenant. That is what makes these children so special, such treasures. Our spiritual seed according to election are richly privileged, members of God's own family. They may enjoy God's fellowship, grow up with Him. God chose them to be His own and He gave them wonderful promises: fatherly care, forgiveness of sins, renewal of life. These promises remain. God remains faithful, despite our unfaithfulness. Our starting-point in dealing with our children is, therefore, not what is in the child, but what God has said to our children with a view to His elect, God's gift of grace. The covenant implies: God acts first. He is sovereign. And on that basis we train up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and call them to respond positively to the promises and demands of the covenant. Failure to stress God's undeserved grace and the children's ongoing responsibility, in response, will inevitably lead us in an Arminian or humanistic direction. Then the emphasis will fall on man and his ability to choose for God. Whereas all glory should be given to God for His sovereign choice.

In the covenant the children receive promises and obligations. They are obliged to a new obedience. They are to cleave to this one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to trust Him and to love Him with their whole heart, soul and mind and with all their strength. God has set them apart so that they might praise and glorify Him. That is ultimately the goal of their lives.

In order to determine what to give our children, it is important to be conscious of their position and their goal in life. They are treasures, to whom God has given a high office and calling. They are not just physical beings or intellectual beings to whom we wish to give the best food and education. No, the spiritual dimension of their lives is what makes them so special. They are set apart to be for the Lord. That will determine our choices for them. We want to see them grow and to mature to God's glory. We want them to be trained as co-workers of God. We want them to reach their potential as God's children. This may mean at times that difficult choices need to be made and sacrifices. This will mean that what is best academically is not necessarily best for our children. In a man-centred culture our children need to be taught that life needs to be God-centred. Our aim in life is the glory of God, is it not. The Third Treasure - Reformed Education

In light of the above, you will not be surprised that the third treasure I wish to mention is Reformed Education. I realise that an own Reformed school is not a command of God in the sense that under all circumstances we would have to have our own schools. Circumstances can prevent it and there can also be individual cases where Reformed Education is not the solution. We have to keep the overall goal in view, namely that our children may be equipped for lives of service to God's glory. General rules are made in view of attaining Godly goals and not the other way round.

But apart from exceptional circumstances and cases, isn't it a logical conclusion from the above that we would treasure Reformed Education? How would God have us educate covenant youth? What method of education honours Him most as their sovereign Creator and Redeemer?

We will all agree that state schools are generally speaking not the best option for our young children. Would it be

pleasing to God to subject immature and vulnerable young people to a God-hating institution, when a Reformed school is available? The message public education keeps sending to impressionable youth is that God is irrelevant. They teach the people to have faith in humanity instead of God.

The primary aim is "to provide quality Reformed Education". Learning is what schooling is about. Children need to learn the subjects which the government has stipulated so that they can operate as Godly citizens in this world to God's honour. That takes precedence. Should the school fail to create pedagogically responsible teaching situations in which the students are equipped for their task in life, then it would not be worthy of its name, no matter how much it is called Reformed.

A school is not a church or a Theological college. Nor does the school take over the responsibility of the parents. Parents are and remain responsible for spiritual upbringing of their children.

Yet the school can and should help parents. That is why a mission statement should mention as the overall goal "to assist parents in equipping their children for lives of service in the Lord's Kingdom."

Note the overall aim: God's coming kingdom. Biblical education builds on the covenant which God made with the children. The children need to be formed in the teachings and morals of the new covenant. They need to see their whole life and work in the light of God's revelation. Good Reformed Education must therefore not only be based on the Reformed faith, it must also reflect it in the various subjects and it must promote it in the lives of the students.

Can a general Christian school fulfil that job? Can we expect such a school to approach the children on the basis of the covenant with its promises and obligations? Can we expect such a general Christian school to promote the Reformed faith, that is, to promote the truths of Scripture which we as parents believe and confess?

In our post-modern age of relativism ("there is no absolute truth any more, truth is subjective"™) and absolute tolerance of other people's thoughts and morals we need to question the role a general Christian school could play in the spiritual development of our children. Can such a Christian school combat the evil of relativism when it accepts people from so many different denominations and with such divergent views? Can such a school truly promote love for the truth or will it confuse our children? These are questions we seriously need to ask ourselves.

To maintain and improve a Reformed school you need parents and supporters who love and cherish the Reformed faith. Generally speaking, the doctrinal and spiritual level of the school will not be higher than that of the people supporting it. If we do not remain Reformed, in doctrine and life, then we will not attain to the ideal of a school which is based on and reflects the Reformed faith. In that case the cause of Reformed Education is a hopeless one.

Apart from Reformed supporters we also need good Reformed teachers, who are enthusiastic about the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. Let the teachers keep working on it to maintain their faith, hope and love. And let us as parents and supporters stand around them with our prayers and words of encouragement.

Thus to run a Reformed school demands the full commitment of all who are involved in it. There is a need for great wisdom and godliness. But God will bless us when we together treasure his gifts and use them wisely to His glory. Keep focussed on the goal. We are not out to glorify ourselves or to fight for our own cause. Nor is a Reformed school a goal in itself. The aim is the glory of God. The best goal you can ever work for. We also have an overwhelming and inspiring gospel! It keeps us on our feet and it is something we love to pass on. Scripture alone, grace alone, Christ alone, faith alone. God the sovereign one, the first and the last, the origin and goal of life. To God alone give glory!

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FOOTNOTES 1. The following paragraph has been altered to reflect the truth that God's faithful covenant promise is made unconditionally to the elect children of believers, and not to all conditionally.