

HOW OUR REFORMED FAITH INFORMS OUR TEACHING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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Recent studies indicate that only about half of our church members grew up Presbyterian, and many of these left our Presbyterian congregations during their teen years only to return later as they begin to establish families. As a result, an understanding of our Presbyterian heritage and the tenets/themes of our Reformed faith is not part of the background or memory of most of our members.

As folks make a commitment to the ministry of teaching children or youth, they often come to the task with a sense of call, a love for young people, a desire to pass along the stories of our faith, and an earnestness to teach with creativity and age appropriateness. However, many are unaware that being Reformed implies particular things about the ways that we teach the children and youth in our care. To that end, we look to the major tenets our tradition to consider how they inform our teaching.

We begin with a presupposition held by all Christians which is foundational to our teaching:

Jesus Christ is God Incarnate and the head of the Church. Therefore:

- Our goal for Christian education is to know, love and follow Jesus Christ.
- Our responsibility as teachers of children and youth is
 - to help them come to *know* Jesus Christ by teaching them the stories of God/Jesus,
 - to help them come to *love* Jesus Christ by loving them as Christ has loved us,
 - and to encourage the children/youth to *follow* Jesus Christ by modeling our own commitment as disciples of Christ as well as offering the young people opportunities to respond as disciples, being mindful of faith development issues, their age, and their learning abilities.

Another presupposition held by all Christians which is foundational to our teaching is the Doctrine of the Trinity: **God is known to us in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.**

- Our belief in a Triune God prompts us to use language that reflects the three-fold nature of God in our teaching and in our prayers.

Tenets/Themes of the Reformed Tradition:

Sovereignty of God

(e.g., God is the Creator of all things, is in control of the universe and is absolutely independent of any other power or will.) Therefore:

- We know that is God, *not us*, who give children and youth the gift of faith. We can only provide the atmosphere in which the nurturing of faith can take place.

- We teach our children/youth that God continues to be active in our world and we are called to respond to God's activity. Worship and prayer are among the ways we respond to God.
- We teach that God is *for* us and does not give up on us, and that God desires the best for all of God's creation.
- We help the children/youth learn that each of us is a unique and special part of God's creation, and that we are a gift to one another.

Authority of Scripture

(e.g., The Bible is the inspired Word of God and is the final authority for salvation and the life of faith.) Therefore:

- We recognize that knowledge is important and that memorization of *foundational* Bible passages (ex: Psalm 23, John 3:16) can be an effective way to under gird that knowledge. At the same time, we emphasize the *understanding* of scripture over the rote memorization of scripture, knowing that *understanding* promotes response as disciples.
- We read the stories from the Bible as they are appropriate, rather than from a resource storybook. When we do read from the resource storybook, have the Bible visible when the story is told.
- We reinforce the story with age-appropriate activities that allow the children/youth to retell the story in their own worlds.
- We incorporate into our teaching a variety of activities which reflect a contemporary setting in order to connect scripture with the daily lives of the children/youth, thus reinforcing the relevance of God's Word for their lives today.

Justification by grace through faith

(e.g., There is absolutely nothing we can do to earn God's love. God chose us before we chose God.) Therefore:

- We are to demonstrate God's love to all the children/youth, especially to those who are difficult to love, "presenting images of God as persuasive love rather than coercive power."¹
- We avoid offering activities which imply "scorekeeping" (ex: stickers for attendance or for memorization) lest we give the impression that performance or particular ways of responding are necessary for recognition and acceptance.

God's election

(e.g., God chooses to be our God. Belonging to God through Christ brings new life to each of us as we join with his community of disciples.² Being chosen/elected carries with it not only privilege but responsibility.) Therefore:

- We have a responsibility to share the Good News and to teach matters of faith in an atmosphere of love and acceptance.
- Since salvation is God's doing, not ours, we must be careful not to pass judgment on children, youth or parents with whom we work, or draw

conclusions about the status of their relationship with God. We are charged by our Lord to love one another.

- We empower the children and youth in our care to take on leadership roles within the classroom and in congregational life and worship.

God's call to service and stewardship

(e.g., The Christian life is marked by the responsibility to serve others, to respond to the needs of all of God's creation, and to share our time, talents and treasures.) Therefore:

- Our focus is on serving Christ as individuals within the community of faith.
- A commitment to teach in the Church School comes from a sense of call which is from God and is confirmed by the church.
- We promote "learning by doing" activities (drama, simulations, role play, direct experience, etc.) over passive learning (lecture, reading, worksheets, videos).
- We can begin to teach, even at an early age, that all of us are called to take responsibility for God's creation. This means choosing games and activities that do not call for wasting a lot of food, such as kiddie pools filled with jello, throwing pies, games with bananas or whip cream, etc.
- We can begin to teach, even at an early age, that each of us is called to share with others the gifts that God has given us.
- We can help the children/youth identify ways to share their time, talents and treasures.
- We can help the children/youth begin to identify their own gifts from God and affirm those gifts.
- We offer opportunities for the children to practice their discipleship both within and outside the church.

Covenant community

(e.g., God created us to be in relationship with God and with others. The Church is a strong example of a community of faith where we are to know, love and follow Christ.) Therefore:

- We are to establish an atmosphere in which the children/youth identify church as a place where they feel accepted, affirmed and loved as well as feel a sense of belonging.
- We need to learn each child's/youth's name and call each by name every Sunday.
- We encourage an atmosphere of mutual respect and regard among the members of the class. This can be initiated through a Class Covenant.
- We handle discipline problems with love and mutual respect.
- We use curriculum that is faithful to Scripture and the Reformed tradition and that has been approved by the session as our primary source and guide for teaching the biblical stories.
- We use age-appropriate activities.
- We make efforts to use community building games and activities.

- It is more important to deal with the children's/youth/s questions, concerns and personalities than to cover the lesson.

Priesthood of all believers

(e.g., The Holy Spirit speaks to each individual, regardless of age.) Therefore:

- We offer a variety of activities in each class session to foster faith development and nurture, keeping in mind the varieties of way the children/youth learn.
- We are to nurture the inquisitiveness of the children/youth by using open-ended questions as appropriate to age, learning abilities, etc. and not offering quick, easy, black-and-white answers. We are to help them to think through their faith.
- We create an atmosphere that says it is alright to ask questions, to grow and change. We are a people of "faith seeking understanding."
- We should not be alarmed as the children/youth express doubts regarding faith issues. Our role is to be clarifiers of the faith rather than defenders of the faith.
- We trust the Holy Spirit to nudge their thinking.
- We recognize the fact that every member of the congregation has a unique contribution to make to the lives of others, thus we need to be advocates for the children/youth and help create opportunities for them to share their gifts.

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¹ Helen Goggin, "What Should be on the Church's Agenda for Children in the 21st Century?," *APCE Advocate*, Spring 1997, p.13.

² Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, p.138.