

“Reformed Basics”: 6. Church and Christian Life

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While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matt 12:46–50)

1. How Do We Live In Light Of All This?

If Christ has died for us, and we live in union with him as he has been resurrected and exalted, what does that look like day-to-day? Jesus saves, not just individuals, but a people. Jesus saves us by adopting us into his family. And we live still in the world. Our new identity shapes our life in God’s family and in the world.

2. The Church: God’s Covenant People, Our New Family

God has always worked by saving a people for himself, not just individuals. This is because God works through covenants. Each administration of the Covenant of Grace defines a people that belongs to God, whom he blesses and protects. In Noah’s and Abraham’s time this people was defined by blood and marriage: by natural family ties. In a wider sense Israel in the Old Testament was defined by natural family lines. But even Abraham was promised that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:3) God’s intent to bless all the nations through Abraham’s descendants was fulfilled when Christ came. After Pentecost God’s covenant people began spreading throughout the world.

Thus the New Testament church is a continuation of God’s covenant people. Paul regards the Gentile Corinthians as descendants of the Israelites who came out of Egypt:

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. (1Cor 10:1–4)

But where Israel was a family defined by blood, the Church is a family defined by grace:

While [Jesus] was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matt 12:46–50)

The Church is God’s “household”—his extended family: “I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God.” (1 Tim 3:14–15) Thus Paul naturally uses family language to describe how Timothy is to relate to his church: “Do not rebuke an older

man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.” (1 Tim 5:1–2)

This Church has a definite, visible form. She consists of multiple local congregations, as did the New Testament churches. Each congregation has her own elders and deacons. (1 Tim 3:1–13) The elders in a congregation have a defined, known set of members they are responsible for.¹

It follows that if I belong to Christ, I am part of his family. And I have a duty to join a local congregation to “support its worship and work to the best of my ability,” “submitting to the government and discipline of the Church.”²

The church subverts and transcends human cultures. On the one hand, many traditional cultures insist that the family is greater than the individual, that the individual finds identity by belonging to and serving the family and the nation. Jesus teaches that the believer’s new, Spirit-formed family (see Matt 12 again) supersedes natural family ties. On the other hand, Western culture asserts that each individual creates their own identity. Identity is to be discovered individually. Rather, Jesus teaches that his own find their identity in union with him. So the church subverts human cultures: our identity is not primarily found in natural family nor in self-discovery, but in Christ.

The Reformed view of the church also subverts pathological views of the church that have arisen in the course of history. On the one hand the church and her ministers are not the ultimate authority in the Christian life. Every believer has an immediate relation to Christ. The church ministers the word of Christ to his people, with authority, but the final authority in all religious matters “can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.” (CF 1.10) On the other hand, the church is not merely a voluntary association. Believers are called to “obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (Heb 13:17); this in a context of “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Eph 5:21) Thus the church is neither a mere civic association, nor the ultimate authority in the believer’s life. The church “is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Eph 1:23)

3. Worship, the Sacraments, Sabbath

3.1 Worship and Word

The church does many things. She witnesses to Christ before the world. She cares for her members in spiritual and practical matters. She displays the Kingdom of God in acts of mercy to her neighbors. But her chief calling is to worship God: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Pet 2:9) The church’ destiny is the worship of God:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before

¹ 1 Pet 5:3, “So I exhort the elders among you ... shepherd the flock of God that is among you ... not domineering over those *in your charge*”—lit., “*in your assignment*.” Elders are assigned a specific set of people, namely, the members of their congregation. As a believer I have a duty to join a local congregation, to know who my elders are.

² PCA *Book of Church Order* 57-5, questions for membership.

the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev 7:9–10)

What do we do in present-day public worship? Public worship includes these elements: “reading of Holy Scripture, singing of psalms and hymns, the offering of prayer, the preaching of the Word, the presentation of offerings, confessing the faith and observing the Sacraments; and on special occasions taking oaths.”³ The point here is that weekly gathering for worship is the first duty of church members. This duty comes before private worship, acts of mercy, or other commendable activities. Members’ schedules and family life should be oriented around the church’s weekly worship.

The center of Reformed worship is the reading and exposition of the Scriptures. A believer’s understanding of God’s truth is to be shaped mainly by the weekly exposition of the Bible by their pastors, not by Christian celebrity culture or the Internet. It is the pastor who knows his flock and is responsible to God for their welfare, who patiently feeds his flock, who is a believer’s chief guide.⁴

3.2 Sacraments: Baptism, the Lord’s Supper

Among the elements of public worship is “observing the Sacraments.” The sacraments have been misunderstood in a variety of ways. Here is a Reformed understanding of the sacraments. They are (1) instituted by Christ; (2) visible actions; (3) a means of conveying Christ to us; (4) a representation, guarantee and application of God’s grace to us.⁵

The sacraments are instituted by Christ. They are not invented by the church, nor are they the product of tradition. There are two sacraments: baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. They both involve visible, physical actions: in baptism, the pouring or sprinkling of water; in the Lord’s Supper, consuming bread and wine.

The sacraments convey Christ and all the benefits of the New Covenant. The sacraments do not convey a special grace, but God’s ordinary grace in a special way. The sacraments are more than an outward representation. By Christ’s blessing, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the recipient, the sacraments convey real spiritual benefit. They are not to be taken lightly, or as a mere memorial.

Baptism places the mark of the covenant on its recipient. It is not principally a sign of the recipient’s faith, nor does it of itself cause the recipient to be reborn. Rather, as God saves by bringing persons into his covenant people, baptism is the mark of membership in God’s covenant.⁶

³³ PCA *Book of Church Order* 47-9.

⁴ This is not meant to denigrate other teaching in the church. Carried on under the pastors’ and elders’ supervision, Bible instruction for various ages serves to “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood.” (Eph 4:12–13)

⁵ SC 91–97

⁶ In this regard it is the analog of circumcision in the Old Testament. Whereas circumcision was applied only to males, baptism is applied to all the Covenant people. Whereas circumcision was bloody, baptism relies on Christ’s one sacrifice of himself and instead applies the water of washing.

Baptism is properly applied to an adult who comes to faith in Christ and joins a church. Baptism is also properly applied to the children of church members. Those children are part of the covenant people, as were Israelite children in the Old Testament. Like them, children of New Testament believers, under “the nurture and admonition of the Lord,” and the “godly example” of their parents and the church, will come to “own the covenant” for themselves as they grow. “The inward grace and virtue of Baptism is not tied to that very moment of time wherein it is administered”⁷ but that grace is nonetheless real and effective.

In the Lord’s Supper Christ feeds his people with his body and blood. He does this through the action of the Holy Spirit. The Supper conveys to the believer all the benefits of Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and present exalted life; in short, it furthers the union the believer has with Christ.

The Supper is a sign and seal of the covenant love that Christ has for his people. As a sign the Supper displays that love by tangible elements and actions. It portrays Christ’s giving of himself and brings his loving action to remembrance. As a sign the Supper informs; as a seal the Supper assures. The writing on a diploma states its meaning; the seal on it assures the beholder of its genuineness. So the Supper portrays Christ’s love, and assures the Church (and the individual believer) that Christ’s commitment is genuine. “If God cannot deceive or lie, it follows that he performs all that [the Supper] signifies.”⁸

The Supper is in no sense a re-enactment of Christ’s sacrifice:

The Passover lamb was sacrificed not at the Passover meal but before the meal. Jesus was sacrificed not at the meal but after the meal. So the supper is a meal of fellowship with God on the *basis* of Jesus’ historic sacrifice. In the Lord’s Supper, the sacrifice, offered once for all time, is the presupposition, not the content, of the meal.⁹

It follows that the bread and wine do not become literally Christ’s body and blood. Those are in heaven at the right hand of the Father. In the Supper we do not seek to bring Christ down from heaven, but we seek to be raised by the Spirit where Christ is.

The Lord’s Supper certainly is a memorial of his death, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Cor 11:26) But is more than a memorial. The cup of blessing is a *participation* in Christ’s blood; the bread is a *participation* in his body. (1 Cor 10:16) For this reason, Paul says, to come to the Supper improperly is to “provoke the Lord to jealousy” (1 Cor 10:22).

“...as it is said that his Spirit is our life, so he himself with his own mouth declares that his flesh is truly food, and his blood truly drink ... we expressly testify in the Supper, when we are told of the bread, that we take it and eat it and that it is his body; and that we drink of the chalice and that it is his blood.”¹⁰

The believer comes to the Supper worthily, not by being perfect (then the Supper would benefit no one) but by having a sincere hope in Christ, however weak. “For if we allege as pretext for not

⁷ PCA *Book of Church Order* 56-4.

⁸ Calvin, John, *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, 148.

⁹ Howard Griffith, *Spreading the Feast, Instruction and Meditations for Ministry at the Lord’s Table*. P&R, 2015, 44.

¹⁰ Calvin, 147

coming to the Supper, that we are weak in faith or integrity of life, it is as if a man excuse himself from taking medicine because he is sick.”¹¹

3.3 The Sabbath

A significant part of the church’s worship is her observance of the weekly sabbath. While the sabbath is prominent in the law of Moses, it was instituted at the time of creation, following the Creator’s pattern. Moses reminded the people of this when he gave the Law at Mt. Sinai:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Exod 20:8–11)

The sabbath command remains as relevant as the rest of the Ten Commandments. Since the resurrection of Christ (and the occurrence of Pentecost) the church has transferred her sabbath observance to the first day of the week. This is evident in, among other things, the Apostle’s direction that a collection for the poor be taken on the first day (probably during worship). (1 Cor 16:2; cf. Rev 1:10)

How is the good gift of the sabbath to be used? Believers are to set aside their usual work (having worked diligently the other six days!), to rest,¹² to gather for public worship, and to pursue acts of mercy. Believers are to order their schedules and affairs so that there is no unnecessary work to be done on the day, so that they and their dependents are free to rest and worship. (This duty of organizing to make sabbath observance possible falls especially on heads of households.)

Sabbath observance has always raised practical questions. And at times the church has imposed unnecessary burdens regarding the sabbath, forgetting that “[t]he Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Yet “the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27–28) and we would do well to consider how the culture we live in has shaped the the practice of ourselves and our families.

4. Our Work in the World

As we said in our earlier discussion of what it means to be human, part of what it means is that we labor. Adam was placed in the Garden “to work it and keep it” before sin entered. (Gen 3:15) Labor is not a product of the Fall, but its laborious, futile character is. (Gen 3:17–19) God is often portrayed in Scripture as a worker, a craftsman, a maker. We bear his image, so we also work.

The Reformation restored dignity to “callings” to work in the world. The Church had slipped into thinking that “religious” callings as a monk, nun, or priest were inherently more pleasing to God. The Reformed Churches in particular repudiated that and taught that all Christians are “called” by God to work in some way in the world, and that “secular” callings are not to be

¹¹ Calvin, 153.

¹² And to allow their dependents also to rest: “that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt...” (Deut 5:14)

despised. To be sure, church-related callings have a special dignity, but they do not offer a shorter road to heaven.

Why work now in this time between the Fall and the Consummation?

The first reason is simply to provide for oneself and one's family. As Paul instructs the Thessalonians about Christ's second coming, he urges them "to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one." (1 Thess 4:11–12) They are to take care of themselves, to behave in a way that gives the church a good reputation with outsiders. In a later letter Paul, regarding church members who had given up working (perhaps in the expectation of Christ's return?), says "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat." They are "to earn their own living." (2 Thess 3:10)

A second reason to work is to have something to share with others. This includes the support the church's teachers: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'" (1 Tim 5:17) The believer is to work to support the church, and also to care for those in need. "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need." (Eph 4:28)

A third reason to work is for the joy of it and the good it does in the world. Deciding on an occupation by "following your passion" can be a trap. But we do bear God's image and he has given us a diversity of gifts. Our productive labor is part of God's "common grace" by which he preserves and enriches the world. "None should stand as cyphers [as zeroes] in their generation, but so employ themselves as to be blessings in it, that their absence may be sensibly felt."¹³

5. *Marriage and Family*

Marriage is one of the "creation mandates," as we discussed earlier. It is a normal part of human life, and most people in a healthy society will marry and raise a family. The Reformed tradition sees marriage as a path of Christian discipleship.

Not everyone will marry, either because of inability, or circumstances, or from a calling in "the kingdom of heaven" that precludes it. (Matt 19:11) Celibacy does allow a less divided concern for "the things of the Lord" but is not an inherently superior calling. (1 Cor 7:32–35)

The purposes of marriage, according to our Confession, are: "the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with legitimate issue, and of the church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness." (CF 24.2)

Marriage is to be between one man and one woman. It is lifelong. Moses' command regarding divorce was, as our Lord taught, a concession, not a command. (Matt 19:8) Yet adultery after marriage may be grounds for divorce (Matt 19:9), as may be "such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate." But in such a case "a public and orderly course of

¹³ Richard Steele, *The Religious Tradesman*, 15.

proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it [are] not left to their own wills, and discretion.” (CF 24.5)¹⁴

6. *Civil Government*

Civil government existed before the Fall, in the seed form of the family. After the Fall, civil government was re-affirmed in the covenant with Noah. (Gen 9:5–6) The Reformed have always believed, contrary to the Anabaptists, that “it is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto ... they may lawfully, now under the new testament, wage war, upon just and necessary occasion.” (CF 23.2) Centurions (Roman officers) always get good notices in the Gospels. (Matt 23:5–13; Matt 27:54; Acts 10:1–8) John the Baptist does not tell repentant soldiers to leave their posts but to act honestly. (Luke 3:14)

Thus some Christians may serve in civil government or the military, but all Christians are to submit to legitimate authority and pay their taxes. (1 Pet 2:13–17) Civil government is not ultimate; it cannot bind the conscience of Christians.

There has been significant development in Reformed thinking about the relation of church and state. In Calvin’s Geneva (roughly second half of 1500s) and at the time of writing of our Confession of Faith (1647) all Christians assumed that it was the duty of civil government to enforce “true religion,” to maintain and promote the true church. Reformed thinking on the role of the state in religion has changed since then, as a consequence of the many wars of religion in the 16th and 17th centuries. When the first Presbyterian synod was established in the newly independent USA (1788) our Confession and Catechisms were modified to remove the state’s control of church matters. From our Book of Order:

“The Church has no right to construct or modify a government for the State, and the State has no right to frame a creed or polity for the Church. They are as planets moving in concentric orbits: ‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.’” (BCO 3-4)

The Reformed churches have usually existed under persecution by the civil magistrate. Out of that experience in France, Germany, Holland, and later in the British Isles, there developed a theory of legitimate resistance to tyranny. That theory, in general, denied private rebellion, and required lesser civil rulers to correct higher rulers.

7. *The Poor*

God, in both Old Testament and New, is concerned for the poor. Care for the poor is a central part of true religion.

Father of the fatherless and protector of widows
is God in his holy habitation. (Ps 68:5)

¹⁴ The Puritans are caricatured as inhuman killjoys, especially those in New England. But in a day when marriages were arranged strictly for the sake of property, the Puritans were careful to give an intended couple time to know and grow to love each other before marriage. If the couple detested each other, they were not forced. See Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*, Harper & Row, 1966.

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isa 58:6–7)

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor...”
“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:18)

The early Christian Church continued that concern:

“I shall bring you testimony from the divine Scriptures, saying that not only the theft of others’ goods but also the failure to share one’s own goods with others is theft and swindle and defraudation. What is this testimony?... by the prophet, God says, ‘The earth has brought forth her increase, and you have not brought forth your tithes; but the theft of the poor is in your houses.’ Since you have not given the accustomed offerings, he says, you have stolen the goods of the poor.” –John Chrysostom, ca. AD 400¹⁵

The early Reformed Church continued the concern as well:

When God gives someone more than he needs... God makes me his deputy as it were... So all rich people, when they have the means to do good, are certainly there as God’s officers and carry out what is in their character as such – that is, helping their neighbors to live.¹⁶

If we believe heaven is our country, it is better to transmit our possessions thither than to keep them here where upon our sudden migration they would be lost to us. But how should we transmit them? Surely by providing for the needs of the poor.¹⁷

Our Church’s Larger Catechism, published in 1647, reflects a concern for justice, especially toward the defenseless.

Q. 142. *What are the sins forbidden in the eighth commandment?*

A. The sins forbidden in the eighth commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are, theft, robbery, man-stealing, and receiving anything that is stolen; fraudulent dealing, false weights and measures, removing landmarks, injustice and unfaithfulness in contracts between man and man, or in matters of trust; oppression, extortion, usury, bribery, vexatious lawsuits, unjust enclosures and depredation; engrossing commodities to enhance the price; unlawful callings, and all other unjust or sinful ways of taking or withholding from our neighbor what belongs to him, or of enriching ourselves...

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, 48

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Sermon CXXLI on Deteronomy 24:19–22*. Quoted in André Biéler, *Calvin’s Social and Economic Thought*, 284.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.18.6

The Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck writing in 1891 discusses the “social question” in his day:

Because the redemption in Christ renews but does not eliminate the various earthly relationships in which we find ourselves, there remains a large place for the ministry of mercy. Just like the poor (Matt. 26:11; John 12:8; Rev. 13:16), so, too, the many needy will always be with us. In the same way that Jesus the compassionate High Priest is always deeply moved by those in need, so, too, directs his followers especially to clothe themselves with the Christlike virtue of compassion ([Matt. 5:43–47]; Luke 6:36).⁴ Having received mercy from Christ, his followers are expected in turn to show mercy to others (1 Peter 2:10; Matt. 18:33). It is for this reason that the church has a distinct office for the ministry of mercy.¹⁸

8. Summary

The Reformed view of life is comprehensive. “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”¹⁹ Thus Abraham Kuyper argued that the newly founded Free University in the Netherlands should concern itself with all aspects of our human calling. We do not become less human because we are redeemed, but more. We experience God’s grace in all our callings. We live together now as God’s covenant people. We look forward to to “the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God,” into which will come “the glory and the honor of the nations.”

9. For Further Reading

Our church’s subordinate standard, the Westminster Larger Catechism, has a great deal to say about labor, society, and justice in questions 140–142. The Catechism is available here: <https://opc.org/sc.html>

The Westminster Confession discusses marriage and divorce in ch. 24: https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_24

9.1 Books

Timothy Keller’s book on labor and its part in the Christian life and society: Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, Penguin Books, 2012.

The English Puritans saw our work as a vital part of Christian discipleship. They were also concerned that Christians conduct themselves justly and uprightly in their work. This reprint of an earlier book is quaint but short and thought-provoking: Richard Steele, *The Religious Tradesman*, Sprinkle Publications, Harrisonburg, VA, 1989.

From the Amazon blurb: “Dorothy L Sayers’ great lay contemporaries in the Church of England were T. S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams. [She herself is known for her theological writing and her Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries.] In this crisp, elegant exercise in theology, Sayers

¹⁸ Herman Bavinck, “General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today,” trans. John Bolt, *Journal of Markets & Morality*, 13, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 411–446

¹⁹ *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Eerdmans, 1998), 488

illuminates the doctrine of the Trinity by relating it to the process of writing fiction, a process about which she could speak with complete authority. She illustrates her thesis with many examples drawn from her own books, and even illuminates the Christian heresies by analysing certain failures of creation which regularly occur in literature.”

Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, Continuum, 2005.