

# The Reformed Family: Authoritative Content of the Gospel

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## Introduction

If the topic of this article is correct, and it is, the article will be a written proclamation and defence of the gospel. The topic asserts that the Reformed, Christian family is the content of the gospel. I will show this from the gospels and epistles of the New Testament. What is read, therefore, is the gospel in an important aspect of it. The article is not simply another discourse on family. The implication is that to err concerning the family is to err concerning the gospel; to be silent about the family is to be silent about the gospel; to fail to defend the family is to fail to defend the gospel.

This seriousness of the family exposes the grievous fault of many churches and ministers in their treatment of the truth of the family. They dismiss the matter of the family, and of marriage, which is basic to the family, as really unrelated to the gospel. I contend that the gospel itself is at stake in the matter of a church's doctrine and practice of family and family life. I warn also that with the state's and the false church's perversion of marriage and the family, as in the case of the sanctioning of so-called homosexual "marriage," the gospel itself is at stake.

I make clear what the nature of this written form of a lecture is. It is not an article devoted to the truth of marriage and, with marriage, to the evils of divorce and remarriage. Something of this necessarily is included. But this is the subject of another article. My subject here is the Reformed, Christian family.

My task in this article is to prove and demonstrate the relation between the family and the gospel itself. The gospel proclaims the family. The gospel saves the family. The gospel uses the family in its glorious work. On its part, the family promotes the gospel.

Therefore, the family is a precious reality to the Reformed, Christian man, woman and child. It ought to be held in honour. It ought to be lived in rightly by the married. It ought to be prepared for carefully by the unmarried young man and young woman. Little children who have Christian parents living rightly in marriage ought to give thanks for the family—every day. Seriously, thanks for the family ought to be part of the little child’s evening prayer:

Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray thee Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray thee Lord my soul to keep. I thank thee Lord for my father and mother and for our peaceful family. Forgive my sins. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

## **How the Gospel Proclaims the Family**

First off, in any consideration of the family at this late date in history, especially in the depraved West, it is necessary to establish what the family is. This is established, not from the thinking and practice of a corrupt society, whose hearts God has hardened and whose minds He has darkened, and not even from decisions by the Supreme Court of such an advanced nation as the United States, but from the revelation of the Creator of mankind and of marriage, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has made Himself and His will known in the Bible. God created the human race in a male and a female, and God instituted marriage as the unique union of a male and a female (Gen. 1-2). The New Testament honours this creation ordinance. With appeal to Genesis 1 and 2, Jesus authoritatively described, and prescribed, marriage thus: “a man [shall] leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh” (Matt. 19:5). The great passage on marriage in the New Testament, Ephesians 5, regulates marriage as the union of husbands (in the masculine gender, in the original Greek) and wives (in the feminine gender). In an important passage on marriage, I Peter 3 identifies wives as “holy women” (vv. 1-5).

The New Testament takes into consideration the perversion of homosexuality which was rampant in Roman society, as it is in our own. Romans 1:27 judges the sexual relation of males with males as “lust” and “unseemly” or dishonourable. With regard to lesbianism, the sexual activity of females with

females, the gospel calls it “vile affections” (v. 26). What Western culture now regards as “same sex marriage,” Romans 1:26 condemns as “against nature.”

What is most damning in the judgment of Romans 1 of homosexuality is that the passage exposes the wickedness as itself the extreme form of God’s hardening of a society that “did not like to retain God in their knowledge” (v. 28). Homosexual conduct is not only perversity. It is also punishment: “God gave them up” (vv. 24, 26, 28). Since Romans 1 is part of the gospel taught in the book of Romans, “same sex marriage” is not only against nature; it is also against the gospel.

Ordinarily, and most fulfilling of the family, family also includes children. God made this clear also in the beginning when He blessed Adam and Eve, saying, “Be fruitful, and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). That this element of family carries over into the New Testament for believers is plain from the fact that the outstanding passages in the New Testament that address marriage also speak of the children of married couples, for example, Ephesians 6:1-4. Nevertheless, a husband and a wife without children are a family.

The gospel *identifies* family—the *gospel* does.

Then the gospel *claims* and *redeems* the family, among elect believers. The gospel not only claims and redeems individuals, but also families. It does this, first, by redeeming and sanctifying the marriages of believers. Obviously, marriage is fundamental to the family. The New Testament has much to say about marriage. Among the passages that treat the marriages of believers explicitly are Matthew 5, Matthew 19, Mark 10, Luke 16, I Corinthians 7, Romans 7, Ephesians 5, Colossians 3 and I Peter 3. In addition, there are many other passages that allude to marriage. Many of these passages are the teaching of the great preacher of the gospel Himself, Jesus Christ. They are an important and prominent aspect of the gospel that He preached. All these passages show believers how they are to live the life of the gospel.

Some of these New Testament passages on marriage directly link the truth of marriage to the truth of the gospel: the marriage of the believer reveals what the gospel is. Ephesians 5 teaches that a husband’s self-sacrificing love of his wife illustrates the love of Christ for the church, the love that moved Him to sacrifice Himself for the church by His life-long humbling of Himself and ultimately by His death by crucifixion. This is the *gospel*!

Romans 7 teaches that just as death, and death only, dissolves the marriage bond, so that a woman is free to remarry, so our death to the law frees us from the law's demand of perfect righteousness for salvation and gives us the liberty to be remarried to Jesus Christ in the relationship of grace for righteousness and salvation. This is the *gospel*! Earthly marriage makes known the gospel.

Although we have not space here to examine the gospel's teaching that marriage is a life-long bond, I simply note that the nature of marriage as an unbreakable bond between one man and one woman for life is meant by God to symbolize His unbreakable covenant of grace in Jesus Christ.

The truth of marriage is salvation. It is *gospel*-truth. The corruption of marriage corrupts the gospel.

Likewise, family is taken up into the gospel and made part of Jesus' work of salvation. Family does not remain solely a matter of creation or something of importance only to the Old Testament people of God. Family is the content of the gospel. I call our attention now to the inclusion of children and young people in the "gospel-family." How often did not Jesus Himself make the salvation of the little children part of His gospel! He warned that we must be careful not to offend one of the little ones, one of whom He had set in the midst of His disciples (Matt. 19). He received and blessed infants, as belonging to His kingdom already as infants. These little ones came to Him for His baptismal touch by being carried by their parents (Luke 18). He defended the praising of Himself by little children in the precincts of the temple (Matt. 21).

In addition, the epistles of the New Testament include the children of believers in the church. Therefore, these children are to receive gospel-instruction, how to live a holy, thankful life (Eph. 6; Col. 3). In that the New Testament applies to the children of believers the fifth commandment, "honour your father and your mother," the New Testament teaches that by baptism the children of believers belong to the covenant, just as circumcision was the sign of covenant membership in the Old Testament.

With respect now to the children, family is embraced by the gospel in that God uses the godly rearing of children by believing parents for the salvation of the children. Ephesians 6:4 immediately follows the calling to children in verses 1-3 that they honour their parents, and verse 4 calls on fathers to

rear their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord Jesus. This is possible only if the children of believing parents are reborn by the Spirit of Christ. The proper rearing of them by their parents serves to bring them to spiritual, gospel maturity.

God uses the family to bring forth and save His church. This is *gospel-truth!*

## **Why the Gospel Proclaims the Family**

This, in the first place, accounts for the gospel's proclamation of the family: God's salvation, as a rule, is family-salvation. In the New Testament as in the Old Testament, God saves the children of believers. He uses the godly upbringing of their children by believing parents for this salvation. The Old Testament teaches this covenantal salvation, beginning with the Abrahamic promise: I will be the God of your seed (Gen. 17:7). Of this, circumcision was the sign and seal. That the same is true of God's saving work in the New Testament, the promise of the gospel on the day of Pentecost revealed: "For the promise is unto you, *and to your children*" (Acts 2:39). For this spiritually healthy rearing and life, it is necessary that believers marry fellow believers, that they marry "in the Lord" (I Cor. 7:39). Even Jesus Himself was reared to spiritual maturity in a family with two God-fearing parents.

The gospel proclaims the family also because God honours His creation ordinance. The New Testament gospel of salvation does not overthrow or ignore the creation ordinances of the Old Testament—marriage and the family—but redeems and renews them.

In the beginning, God ordered human life in marriage and family. In the fullness of time, with the coming of Jesus Christ, and by the gospel, God redeems marriage and family, and orders the life of New Testament humanity by these ordinances of creation. In fact, He purifies marriage and family as they appeared in their Old Testament misshapen form, for example, polygamy with its evil consequences for the children of these corrupted forms of marriage. Marriage under the gospel, and lived according to gospel-truth, is much better than the Old Testament marriage with two or more wives, with all the miseries that these polygamous marriages brought with them.

But the ultimate purpose and gospel-significance of the Reformed family are not us and our bliss. The gospel's proclamation of family aims much higher.

In our marriages and families, God is pleased to reveal something, something of the greatest importance, about Himself. First, godly marriages, which are the core of our families, symbolize the spiritual relation between Christ and the church. This is the gospel of Ephesians 5. The Christian husband's self-sacrificing love of his wife represents, to the whole world, the love of Jesus Christ for His church. The wicked world can see this truth of the gospel in the behaviour of the Christian husband. It may never *hear* the word of the gospel or, if it does, it may dismiss it out-of-hand. But it cannot but *observe* the believing man's love of his wife, including sexual faithfulness and tender behaviour. In this connection, the worst aspect of a nominally Christian husband's abuse of his wife is its sin against the testimony to the gospel.

In the Christian behaviour of the believing husband in marriage, the world is confronted by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The wife on her part shows herself a submissive help to her husband, thus testifying to the watching world the submission of the church to Christ. The life of the Christian woman confronts the world with the gospel. It does so all the more clearly in the contrast of this life with the independent, rebellious life of the worldly wives, who under the influence of "feminism" are discontented with being "keepers at home" and scorn the headship of their husbands (Titus 2:5; Eph. 5:22-24). Because the behaviour of the Christian wife expresses the gospel, I Peter 3:1 encourages the believing wife of an unbelieving husband that the gospel of her *life* may be blessed by God for the conversion of her unbelieving husband.

Thus, by means of holy marriages, godly family-life glorifies God.

Second, Christian family-life itself symbolizes the spiritual family of God. The real and everlasting family is the church, members of which are brothers and sisters of each other and of Jesus Christ, our elder brother, and children together of our heavenly Father. Since our earthly families are patterned after the heavenly family, they must show before God and the world the heavenly family and must serve the spiritual family, which is the church. Our families, therefore, must be characterized by order and discipline, peace and godliness.

What a scandal if, by our own sinful behaviour, our families are disorderly, divided by envy, and thoroughly ungodly and worldly. The power of the gospel must control our family-life on behalf of the gospel.

The ultimate disorder and disunity of the family, to the disgrace of God, is the divorce of the husband and wife. Not only does divorce divide the family, but it also, in the case of professing Christians, brings shame upon the name of God and of Christ, whose marriage to the church is symbolized by marriage.

On one occasion, during this writer's pastoral ministry, a couple in the congregation who had been married some twenty years came to the pastor's study to pour out their marital woes—in reality, sinfulness. Once upon a time, they had ignored the apostle's admonition that they “let not the sun go down upon [their] wrath” (Eph. 4:26). Satan had seized the opportunity and had developed in them what amounted to hatred for each other. The pastor responded with never a word, only gazing upon them with obvious disapproval. It was evident that both of them were looking for a remark to the effect that such a marital condition warranted, if it did not demand, divorce. Finally, it began to dawn on them that such a remark would not be forthcoming. The husband leaned forward in his chair and asked, in astonishment, “You don't think we should stay together only for the sake of the children, do you?” The pastor allowed a hint of a smile to relieve his grim countenance, “This is the first Christian thing I have heard from either of you since you stepped in the door. Yes, if for no other reason, stay together for the children and work at loving each other again. And do it above all for God's sake, to whom you once promised to live faithfully together until death would part you, to His honour.”

The divorce of professing Christians dishonours God. It signifies the dissolution of His family.

A third way in which the Reformed, Christian family proclaims the gospel is its testimony to God Himself as family. Everything earthly that is good ultimately goes back to, and ends in, God. There is such a thing as family, because God is family. God *is* family. He is Father and Son in the Holy Ghost. This is family. Father and Son live in fellowship—the communion of love—in the Holy Ghost who is the personal bond of union and communion between them. The Son “is in the bosom of the Father” as the dearly beloved Son in the

divine family (John 1:18). Because this is who God is, this is how the human race is ordered and this is why, among believers living in holiness, family-life is the blissful experience that it is.<sup>1</sup>

Our witness to family is not merely human wisdom; it is the gospel of God. Attack on the family in our day is not only utter human folly, destructive of human society—and it is! It is revolt against God—against not only what He teaches but also who He is. We proclaim and defend the truth of family because it is gospel-truth about God Himself.

As family—the *divine* family—is bliss for God, so also is family beneficial for believers.

### **With What Benefit the Gospel Proclaims the Family**

A benefit of family is our happiness. This is celebrated in the Old Testament in Psalm 128. God blesses the godly man with a wife inside his house and with children like olive plants around his table. He sees his grandchildren. The thought of the psalm is that the covenant family is itself the product of divine blessing and the sphere of earthly life in which God bestows, and the members of the family experience, divine favour.

The single Christian does not lack divine blessedness but he enjoys it in the spiritual family, the church. Even then, as the rule, the New Testament exhortation is that the single members of the church marry: “I will that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house” (I Tim. 5:14). Implied is the calling of the younger men to propose marriage to the younger women.

The New Testament is in full agreement with the Old Testament in teaching that believers live out their blessed Christian life in godly marriage and family. Ephesians 5 is convincing. In the practical part of that grand epistle, the Holy Ghost makes the happiness of the marriage of the godly husband and wife symbolic of the exquisite bliss of the real marriage of Christ and the church.

Chapter 6 adds children to the picture, encouraging the children of a Christian family to live rightly with their parents, “that it may be *well* with

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<sup>1</sup> See also David J. Engelsma, *Trinity and Covenant: God as Holy Family* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2006).

thee” (v. 3). The well-being, the true happiness, of children is found in the sphere of a Christian home. All the misery of children in dysfunctional homes in our society proves the purpose of God of the happiness of the well-ordered, Christian family. In Chicago, in the United States, 80% of the children and young people grow up in homes without a father in the home, that is, without family-life. The young people, therefore, seek in gangs what family ought to provide. The result is the violence, murder and drug use of the big city. God has ordained the family. Without family, society itself falls apart and millions of dollars cannot put Humpty-Dumpty together again.

The gospel also proclaims family for the welfare of the church. Always and in every way, the gospel promotes the church, which is the bride of Jesus Christ. It does so by means of the godly family. The single believer is a full and honourable member of the church—think of the apostle Paul!—but as the rule Christ builds His church with families, as the passages in Ephesians 5 and 6, and Colossians 3 make plain. One respect in which this is true is the gathering of the church from the baptized children of believing parents whom God uses to rear the children to spiritual maturity. Reformed churches acknowledge this gospel-truth of the family by numbering their membership in families.

Ultimately, the gospel proclaims and saves families, to glorify God. Always and in every respect, the gospel ends in God and His glory. Family was God’s basic institution of the human race in the beginning. It was intended as the fundamental ordinance for the order and welfare of the race. Sin shattered the family. Grace rebuilds and restores the family for the ordering and the welfare of the new human race in Jesus Christ, in order that the covenant family may serve and praise the God of the family.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This article was originally a speech given at the 2018 British Reformed Fellowship family conference at Hebron Hall in South Wales.