



Graduation and character education

It is a great honour for me to stand before you this evening – on this special moment in your life! Yes, the moment has at last arrived! All that hard work of completing assignments is behind you. In a few months time you will be scattered across the country, taking on the challenges of your new positions as Reformed teachers! Not all of you have made the choice to enter the teaching profession at the present time. However, as you know better than I do: your years at Covenant were not a waste of time. What you have learned will benefit you wherever the Lord leads and directs your path.

Teachers occupy a special place of responsibility, whether they are lecturing at a college, working at the high school level, or beginning to acquaint children with the joy of learning at an elementary school. As Reformed community we can easily take for granted the role teachers play in the lives of our children. We benefit in so many ways from the faithful and selfless labours of our dedicated teachers. Let us not cease to give thanks to the Lord for his goodness.

Teaching children – a blessing

Teaching children in the setting of our Reformed schools is a tremendous blessing! During the course of the year there will be times when the pressures of the work will threaten to drag you down. That is when you will need to get on your knees and thank the Lord for the privilege of being a teacher. By teaching the various subjects you give the children wings, allowing them to soar like an eagle – observing the beauty of God's creation; enabling them to read the Scriptures and find solace and comfort in the gospel of Christ.

The Teachers College has provided you with tools in different areas of study. You have learned various methods of pedagogy and have also come to see that the foundation of Reformed education is the doctrine of the covenant. The children you will teach are special. They share with you a mark that distinguishes them from others – they bear the mark of God's redeeming love and faithfulness! Whether you stand in front of a class of little children who are eager to do what the teacher tells them, or if you stand with fear and trepidation before a rowdy bunch of teens that challenge and exasperate you – all these children have received the promise of forgiveness of their sins and the daily renewal of their life.

These children are also part of a battle. They are soldiers in training. Yes, in the classroom you will experience the antithesis the Lord has placed between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. You as brand new teachers will begin to teach within the context of an age-old struggle. Together with your future students you are on the battlefield fighting three sworn enemies – the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh. In that battle you are to help the students hold high the banner that acknowledges Christ to be king of every area of life!

In a Reformed school setting teachers and students confess to belong to Christ! Everything is subject to his government and that, ladies and gentlemen, must soak through the seams of your lesson planning. The foundation of your instruction is the wisdom of the Lord found in Scripture. To be effective in teaching, you need to be drenched with the Word of God. For even though you are graduating from Covenant Canadian Reformed Teachers' College you remain in school. Teachers and students are in the same school – the school of the Holy Spirit as pupils of Christ.

Reformed education is far more than teaching the children to know the stories of the Bible and to have a good understanding of church history. The Lord Jesus Christ has opened the way for us to have communion and fellowship with the Father and with each other. That means the classroom is

a place of learning, not only through the subject material that is taught, but also in our interaction with the students. You will be in contact with the students, other staff members, and with the parents.

Character education

On this graduation evening, as you are about to embark on a teaching career, I wish to whet your appetite to an aspect of Reformed education that you as future teachers ought to develop further – integral to covenant education is character education. Character education is in the way you talk, the behaviour you model, the conduct you tolerate, the deeds you encourage, the expectations you transmit. Simply put, character education is everything you do that influences the character of the children you teach. But to put it in a more focussed way,

Character education is the deliberate effort to help people understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values. When we think about the kind of character we want for our children, it's clear that we want them to be able to judge what is right, to care deeply about what is right, and do what is right — even in the face of pressure from without and temptation from within.

(How to Do Character Education? by David H. Elkind and Freddy Sweet)

What was read this evening from 2 Peter 1 reminds us that good character virtue is basic to the Christian life – and thus also to Reformed education. What takes place in the school is a microcosm of what we should expect within the church in general. Peter writes,

For this reason, make every effort to add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You can almost hear in these words a kind of surging forward,

As you have obtained faith in Christ and stand in it, apply yourself diligently to advance character and virtue; and as you stand in that do not be satisfied but press on to increase your knowledge of God's will. Nevertheless, do not be satisfied with that but cultivate self-control and patience. Let devoutness and love to God flourish.

In other words, “*Move forward! Press On! Advance the cause of the Lord Jesus Christ!*” (John Piper) Faith is to bear fruit – fruit of the Spirit. Putting what Peter writes into the school setting: advance, move forward so that you be kept from being ineffective in your lesson planning, in the daily routines of the classroom, in your interaction with the students and their parents. Look to furnish your faith with virtue and character.

We have our textbook

The blessing of Reformed education is that we have a textbook that lays out beautifully the ground rules for life in the covenant and for character education. We do not establish the nature of life with God; we do not have to decide on what core values or character traits every Christian should exemplify and develop. The Bible is very specific about how every child of God is to put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, patience. The character education that comes from the Lord and from his Holy Word calls us to show compassion, to be forgiving, to show respect, and to be courageous, content, loyal, honest, truthful, thoughtful, enthusiastic, and joyful. The Word of God also provides us with a good and necessary dose of realism – it will be a life-long struggle to develop good character because by nature we are unkind, unforgiving, selfish, proud, complaining, disrespectful manipulative, hateful, and dishonest.

Effective character education is not adding a program or set of programs to a school. Rather, it is integrated into every aspect of school life, including discipline, playground duty, and sports. Everything in the school is organized around the development of relationships between and among students, staff, and community. Social and emotional learning are emphasized as much as academic learning. Cooperation among students is emphasized over competition. Virtues and

values such as respect, responsibility, honesty, and integrity are part of everyday lessons in and out of the classroom.

Reformed schools are Christian schools where all involved are to confess Christ and present themselves as a living sacrifice of praise. This means that everybody in the school is to be controlled by the love of Christ; by the grace He showed in giving his life for sinners. Every person in the school – students, teachers, volunteers, administration, board members – is therefore to treat everyone else with kindness, honour, and respect. Throughout the year there should be times that you as teaching staff allow the students an opportunity to speak directly to the subject of character education. For example, what does it mean to show kindness, patience, gentleness, love, and joy both within and outside the classroom? Where can improvements be made?

Cooperation – working together – is vital to the wellbeing of covenant education. Team-learning affords opportunities for learning generosity, patience, goodness, kindness. In creating lesson plans, you as a teacher should have in the back of your mind the opportunities the lesson gives to teach character. Good character is to be taught, modelled, and reinforced in whatever way possible.

Within the public school setting character education is becoming increasingly popular. The reasons for this are quite different from what I have presented to you this evening. Some schools have implemented character education as a reactive measure; to develop a united front against bullying, vandalism, drug use, and other inappropriate behaviour. Some forms of character education have their roots in native spirituality. Although we reject the underlying premises of character education as developed by the public school, let this be a stimulant to re-examine our own practices. Through character education we are provided with a means to evaluate our goals and assess our progress as schools – to what extent are we functioning as a Christian community? Are both teachers and students furnished with love, joy, peace, goodness, patience, gentleness, kindness, faithfulness, and self-control?

Life in the covenant

The wonderful thing about life in the covenant is that all that we are called to do has its basis and foundation in what has been done for us. When the Apostle Peter calls us to excellence of character he prefaces that by “for this very reason.” He has spoken of God’s divine power to give us all things. Since the Lord God has given power for godliness and virtue, we are to strive for these things. We strive for virtue and excellence of character because God has already laboured for us and is at work in us. I press on to make the virtues laid out for me in Scripture my own and I want my students to make these things their own because Christ Jesus has made me his own (Philippians 3:12).

Paul speaks the same language when he says in Romans 5,

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance (approved) character, and (approved) character hope.

Graduates, whether you enter into the teaching profession or move on to do something else, furnish your life with those character traits that exemplify the life you have in Christ. May what you have learned during the time you spent at Covenant Teachers’ College be a springboard for growing in a greater appreciation for God’s work with his people. May you also all look forward to the final commencement ceremonies that will take place, when your Teacher, Jesus Christ, returns. Then we will enter post-temporal education – a time when those character traits which have stood the test of time will enable us live in a perfect community of covenant love.

P Feenstra