



Tradition?!

Traditions! What comes to mind when you hear the word? Does it remind you of boring, stuffy old things or valuable meaningful practices? Whatever you think of them, many things you do are formed by tradition. Traditions may determine things you do at home, at school, or at work. Take, for example, an evening like this one, it is filled with many traditions. Why do you wear those gowns?

The word *tradition* has as its root the idea that something is handed over. As in a relay race where you hand over the baton to the next runner, so in tradition certain things are handed over from one generation to the next. The word is therefore closely related to teaching. Traditions tell us that we are not the first ones to do something. Others have done it before us.

I have placed a question mark and an exclamation mark behind the word tradition. Some people love to put a question mark behind every *tradition*: we should have, they say, the freedom to make our own decisions; only then are we authentic. Others put an exclamation mark behind traditions. You cannot change them! Traditions give them a sense of security. Do I seek a middle road by having both, a question mark and an exclamation mark? No. I use the question mark to indicate that it is indeed good to ask, "Why?" but I added the exclamation mark to show that the lesson we learn from asking this question makes the tradition valuable.

No, I am not talking about the traditions of this ceremony. I use the word *tradition* as referring to the teaching you have received. What has been handed over to you? You have received Reformed education. You have been trained in the Reformed tradition. Why? Why did your parents send you to a Canadian Reformed high school? After all, it was and is a choice that had many consequences for them (just think of the financial aspect) and for you (every day you had to travel farther). Why this choice? And will you do it as well when, the Lord willing, you have children? Will you continue the tradition?

I ask this because you and I have arrived at a milestone in our lives when it comes to Reformed education. You have completed all these years of training and now you move on. Is it clear to you why this "baton" was given to you and will you pass it on I also ask the question because I too have arrived at a milestone. This is the last time I can deliver a graduation speech as a parent. Our youngest is graduating. Many years we have been involved in and benefited from Reformed education.

Why did we do this? As I ask the question I look back in my family. My grandfather was a principal of what was then called a School with the Bible. This was soon after the Reformed people in The Netherlands had finally received the freedom to have their own schools. He went through the nineteen thirties! Those were not easy times. My father was a principal as well. That was after the Liberation of 1944. The question he was faced with was: "What impact did the events in the church have on Reformed education?"

I grew up in the Reformed tradition. Not only do I look back two generations, but I also look ahead. As our youngest daughter is graduating, our oldest grandson has started Kindergarten in the Maranatha School of Fergus. Five generations involved in Reformed education. Tradition? Yes, it has been handed over to us by previous generations, and we hand it over now too, but we need to be willing to think about this tradition and be able to answer the question "Why?" so that together we can also put an exclamation mark behind it.

In order to place that exclamation mark, I want to look at three texts. They show that the tradition of Reformed education has to be

1. Living,
2. Christian,
3. Communal.

Living

The first text is Joshua 4:20-24. The people of Israel are instructed to make a monument of stones; a tradition is started there. Stones will outlast human beings, so generations to come will have reason to talk about these stones. *"Father, why are they there?"* The answer is clear: *"Because this is the place where Israel went through the Jordan."* However, note that in the explanation by the father, the child is made a part of what happened in the past. *"The LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over."* You! This discussion between father and child may be 200 years later, but it is still: you crossed over. This father has to make the child a part of the tradition. It is a living tradition, and has to be kept alive. It is the work of your God.

Reformed traditions are important, but we have to explain what their meanings are. Each generation has to make them their own again and has to understand why we do these things. It has to be a living tradition; otherwise, we end up in *traditionalism*. Otherwise, you preserve the outward shell, but the inside is hollow. You were taught at a Canadian Reformed school, a most wonderful tradition, but it has to be a living tradition. I urge you to keep thinking about it. I challenge you to make the tradition your own, so that you will be able to explain it to your children. Graduands, you know why this tradition is to be living? Because the LORD your God is the living God. He made you his own, not through the water of the Jordan, but by his blood. That is why we can keep this tradition alive.

Christian

This brings us to text number 2, Colossians 2:6-8. Paul writes: *"Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him."* This is followed by a warning not to be taken captive through hollow and deceptive wisdom. That addition shows the importance of this text for teaching. Reformed teaching aims to help you discern lest you be taken captive by hollow and deceptive thinking. *"Just as you received Christ Jesus."* How did the Colossians receive Jesus Christ? As Lord. What does that mean? Everything is governed by him. In him all things hold together (see Colossians 1:17). In order to teach discerning wisdom, Christ has to be in the centre. Every subject area is to be subject to the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is yet another element. The Lord, whom you have to obey in all areas of life, is the Lord you know as your Head in the church (see Colossians 1:18). When you were baptized, not only did the LORD say, *"You are mine;"* your parents also pledged to train you in the doctrine of Christ, in the Christian faith, as it is summarized by the church. Thus we have Canadian Reformed schools, tying home, school, and church together, so that you can continue in the Christian tradition, and be equipped to fulfil your task as prophet, priest, and king. If we lose this living connection with Christ, who as the Lord of the church rules over everything (Ephesians 1:22), Reformed education has lost its meaning.

Communal

Text number 3 is from Hebrews 2:13b. I chose that text because I want to stress that covenantal education is part of the covenant community. I believe that this is an aspect we need to be reminded of in our situation.

But isn't covenantal education about parents and children? Sure, that is indeed an important part of covenantal education, but there is more to it. For baptism is not only a sign and seal which shows that you are part of the covenant, that you belong to Christ, it also shows that you were

incorporated into the church. When the Heidelberg Catechism asks in Lord's Day 27, *"Should infants too be baptized?"* Then the answer is, *"Yes, they as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation."* Note the connection between God's covenant and congregation. You with your parents belong to God's covenant community. It is in that community that you received the sign of the covenant.

I could have chosen many texts which show this communal aspect but I chose Hebrews 2 because of an address by Dr. Jelle Faber at the opening of Guido de Bres High School in 1975. Let's start with Hebrews 2:13b. We read there: *"And again he says, Here am I and the children God has given me."* Who is the "I"? That is Christ. Christ is not ashamed to call sinful humans; he is not ashamed to call you and me his brothers and sisters. The letter to the Hebrews, however, quotes from Isaiah 8. There we read: *"Here am I, and the children the LORD has given me."* Isaiah had two sons, both had very strange names. It is even possible that the word "children" refers here to Isaiah's students (see 8:16). Whatever the case, the point is this: Christ takes over the words of Isaiah. That means Christ puts his arms around these children or students of Isaiah and says: *"Here am I and the children God has given me."* He claims these children as his. Christ puts his arms around you, and all our children and says: *"Father, here am I and the children you have given me."* Because Christ does this, we should do so as well.

The children born in the God's covenant belong to the congregation. And for this reason covenantal education takes place within this community, is supported by the community, and is aimed at helping you function in this community. It involves us all: parents, single members, empty nesters, seniors, childless couples. Together we give it our support. If we lose this communal aspect, we endanger the vitality of Reformed education.

Tradition?! Graduands, do not be afraid to ask "Why"? See the wonderful answer we receive. Place the exclamation mark. Make it your own and in due time, hand over the baton. Yes, let's together place an exclamation mark, not because of what you or we have done or can do. It is an exclamation mark that is based on the immeasurable covenant faithfulness of our God and Father.

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