

Who's Really in the Class?

by Dr. Jason Van Vliet

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Introduction

"Good morning class!" "Good morning Mr. Didaskalos!"

And so begins another day in Grade 5 at the Titus Christian School in Somewhereville.

Who knows what the day will all bring, but one thing Mr. Didaskalos knows for sure: it won't be dull. It's *never* a dull day with *this* Grade 5 class because there are some really colourful characters in this class.

In fact, Mr. Didaskalos has his own private nicknames for some of them. Now, for the good of all concerned, he is very careful to keep these nicknames strictly to himself. However, truth be told, within the creative confines of his own mind, some days he cannot help but think of these nicknames.

First there's Robert the Rooster. Physically, Robert is small for his age, but he's big on attention. He can strut; he can perform; antics are his specialty. One way or the other, Robert always makes sure people know he's around.

Then there's Betty the Budgie. Friendly to a fault. Her mannerisms are occasionally quirky, but mostly cute. She's smart enough, but the chattering... oh the chattering. Where Betty is, there is talking, and more talking, and even more talking.

And that's rather different than Owen the Ox. Big, strong, solid Owen. Owen has a strict policy: why use two syllables when one will do? And yet to his credit, he gets the work done. Nothing fancy. Nothing fast. But slowly, steadily, and steadfastly he leans forward in the yoke and pulls the task to completion.

And finally, there's Lucy the lamb. Everyone likes Lucy. How could you *not* like Lucy? So gentle. So kind. Her personality is as warm as wool; her demeanour as soft as cashmere. And yet there's also something vulnerable, almost fragile about her. You hope she won't bolt and run when things get tough.

Well, as you can imagine, with Robert, Betty, Owen, Lucy, and another twenty colourful characters in Grade 5, there is never a dull moment.

Still, in the midst of all this colourful diversity is there also some kind of *significant commonality*? Of course, all these students have to work through the same curriculum. (Perhaps with some modifications for special needs students.) So that's one thing: a common curriculum.

And by now, after spending five or six years of their academic journey together, there is undeniably a certain class bond that they all share together.

But can we dig deeper than that? Is there something of Biblical and theological weight which holds all of these fascinating, unique young individuals together? Well, yes, there are two main answers that are frequently given to that question. Answer #1 says, "Yes, they're all different but they're also all created in the image of God." And so, the image of God is the doctrine that pulls them all together. Answer #2 says, "Yes, those children are a dazzling assortment of diverse characters, but they are all part of the covenant... they are all God's children." True, there may be other answers as well, for example, church membership or kingdom citizenship as the common denominator. But those are really sub-categories, or at least closely related categories, to covenant.

So then, this is the question that we want to explore: who really are those children sitting in front of us in the classroom? What is their *identity*? Does Mr. Didaskalos have twenty-four young images of God sitting in front of him? Or does he have a class full of covenant children? Or both? And if both, which—if any—should have the priority?

Or does it even make any difference, in the end? I respectfully submit to you that, yes, it does make a difference for three reasons:

- First, teachers need to know who is sitting in front of them in order to teach effectively. If pastors need to know their congregations in order to guide them, teachers need to know their students in order to educate them.
- Second, if we view children from the perspective of the image of God, we are looking at how they were created to be. But if we identify them as covenant children, then we are looking at what they have been redeemed to be. Theologically speaking, one focuses on the doctrine of creation while the other focuses on doctrine of salvation. And there is an important distinction to be made there.
- Third, I can still remember the day when Mr. T.M.P. Vanderven gave a guest lecture at the seminary where I was studying for the ministry. Mr. Vanderven was one of the founding fathers

of the Covenant Canadian Reformed Teachers College. In that lecture he said, and I'll never forget it, "First you have to cultivate a good teachable atmosphere, otherwise you can forget about getting any good teaching done." A *teachable atmosphere*: yes, but that's hard to describe in words. Still, this much is obvious: to cultivate a good teachable atmosphere, it certainly helps if everyone in the classroom has a clear idea of who they really are.

So, let's explore this topic of *learner identity* in more detail.

A qualification

Before going too much farther, though, we need to clarify something. Learner identity is obviously linked to the school's admission policy. There are Christian schools that adopt more of a mission model in their admission policy. In other words, they are willing to admit students who are not children of believing parents. So long as those parents agree to have their children educated in a Christian manner, then the school admits those children, all the while hoping that somewhere along the road, those students will be converted and embrace the Christian faith. In that case, some children in the classroom would belong to the covenant and some would not.

Now, it's not my purpose this afternoon to analyze and evaluate that school model. This is an International Conference of Reformed Education, and its first meeting in May 2004 the ICRE agreed on the following statement:

*The school has been established to assist the parents to fulfill their baptismal promises regarding the nurture of their **covenant children**. Reformed education aims to equip the students to employ their talents in the service of God and His kingdom. The entire curriculum will be taught in obedience to the Holy Scriptures as confessed in the Three Forms of Unity.*

So, that statement already gives us a clear indication of who those children in the classroom really are... they are *covenant children*. Of course, we still have to explore what exactly that means and what implications it all has, but in any case that is a good starting point.

Different ways of identifying the child

So, with those two qualifications in mind, we can forge ahead. Of course, every teacher—whether Christian or not—has to have some idea of the identity of the children sitting in front of him. Maybe it's not something that every teacher spends a lot of time consciously thinking about, but it's still there.

In general, teachers will use *chronology* to shape up their view of the student. And that chronology includes the past, the present and the future. The empirical philosopher David Hume was in the habit of saying that the “I,” that is, the ego, is nothing but a big bundle of perceptions. Well, modifying that slightly, many think that our children are basically a big bundle of past experiences. Each child has his or her own personal history. Some of the history is great: wonderful experiences and relationships at home and at school. And some of that history is miserable: very tough, even tragic, events that the child has had to struggle through, one way or the other. And all of that history shapes who the child is today.

And from the past we step forward into the present. Although, truth be told, it’s a rather fast and fleeting step. Just as another philosopher, Heraclitus, once said, “You never step into the same river twice.” Time is always on the move. The present is constantly fleeing into the past. And even if children don’t wax philosophical, they know the reality. Today’s happiness may evaporate tomorrow... maybe even later on today. My friend today may become my foe tomorrow. Emotions, relationships, events and opportunities are all changing as rapidly as river of Heraclitus.

And then there is yet the future. Now the frustrating thing about the future is that you don’t know what it will hold. And yet, also for education, you do want a future goal to work towards. Students often refer to this as career choice. However, there are so many careers to choose from. Will it be mom or medical personnel? Mechanic or minister? Sometimes it’s hard to decide, and sometimes students change their minds as well. Yesterday’s mechanic becomes tomorrow’s minister.

So, in the end, what can we say about chronology and identity? Everyone uses chronology to shape up identity: both the Christian and the non-Christian, both the student and the teacher. But, on the whole, chronology is a complex and unstable thing, and it varies widely from person to person. So, if you identify a student on the basis of his personal history, how do you know that you know enough of his history in order to identify him properly? Maybe you only know the tip of the autobiographical iceberg. And when, on top of that, you factor in the fleetingness of the present and the uncertainty of the future, all in all, you have a rather convoluted picture. Do you need to be aware of personal chronologies as a teacher? Yes, definitely. Can you effectively use chronology as a basis for identity? No, not likely.

In many ways, the same applies to *context*, especially family context. Even though children spend a substantial part of their day at school, their family life has a profound effect on how they view their world and how they view themselves. Basic, subterranean elements such as love, trust, confidence,

respect, stability and zeal are all inculcated in a child long before their little feet ever crossed the threshold of the kindergarten classroom. Context, especially family context, is such a critical part of the students' academic progress—both for good and for ill. However, the difficulty is that contexts vary, sometimes drastically. Also within the church there are delightful families and dysfunctional families. So, yes, in one way, Mr. Didaskalos can look out over his class and give his students a common identity by saying, "They all come from Christian families." But, as you all know, that's less than half the story. Sanctification is a work in progress. Christian families are not perfectly consistent. Therefore, just like with chronology, teachers need to be aware of context, but they are not advised to build the learners' identity on the basis of context.

So, if chronology and context won't do the job, what will? Some, maybe even a lot, of Christian curriculum uses the image of God. Here's how it goes: yes, there are many different characters in the classroom, just as there are many different ethnic groups in the world, but however complex the kaleidoscope of personalities may become, one thing is true across the board for everyone: they are all created in the image of God.

Let's look at a concrete example. In 2006 the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools published a curriculum document for social studies, including a unit on the First Nations people of Canada. Here are a few pertinent quotes from that curriculum document:

- *We also believe that all people in the world, regardless of race, gender, religion, economic status, or location, are made in God's image.*
- *We define what it means to be made in God's image... [as] we create, care, love and forgive.*

Now the first statement is true, according to Scripture. In Gen 9:6 the LORD gives Noah a warning against murder. This warning applies to all mankind, and it is rooted in the image of God. The precise words are: *Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for [or because] God made man in his own image.* And this truth applies in Mr. Didaskalos' classroom just as much as it does in the social studies curriculum. In spite of the all the personal, chronological, and contextual differences between Robert and Betty, between Owen and Lucy, and all the rest of them, they all have this common, Scripturally-based identifier: they are all created in the image of God. We can all agree on that.

But where do you take that? And how do you work with it? You see where the OACS curriculum goes. God is the creator, therefore those created in the image of God should be creative. God is caring, therefore those created in his image should be caring. As God is love, so we should love. As God forgives, so we should forgive. Others extend this even further. God is a God who speaks, therefore, we as his image-bearers must aim for eloquence. God is a God who thinks, therefore, we as his image-bearers must be logical and rational in the way that we think through problems. And again there is some truth there, but there are also problems:

1. Based on Eph 4:24 and Col 3:10, the Heidelberg Catechism in LD 3 defines the image of God as being created in true righteousness and holiness. Having creativity, language abilities and rational powers are not highlighted as part of the image of God, either in Scripture or in the Reformed confessions. Now that does not mean *ipso facto* that connecting creativity and the image of God is wrong or even heretical. To begin with I just want to draw your attention to this fact. In curriculum the image of God is often connected to the creative, linguistic and logical faculties of human beings, whereas in our confessions the image of God is connected with spiritual qualities, namely, righteousness and holiness. Is there a disparity in emphasis there? And if so, why? And is that a healthy thing?
2. Over and over we emphasize that we are all created in the image of God. Correct. But how often do we emphasize that the fall into sin ruined that image of God. It did not eradicate or obliterate it. It's still there, as Gen 9:6 indicates. But sin does utterly ruin it, otherwise why would the image of God need a complete overall by the Holy Spirit, as Eph 4 teaches us, and LD 3 reminds us. In our view of our students and in our curriculum development are we still reckoning fully with the fact that because of the Fall, there is nothing more than "some small traces" of the image of God left in human beings? And how much can you legitimately build on the wobbly foundation of a few small traces? [pause] Ah, but you say, we are now speaking about Christian schools. We are speaking about children in whom, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ himself is busy renewing these young hearts and mind after his own image and likeness. Look, for example, at LD 32. And that is correct, but that also leads directly into the third challenge.
3. If we say, and rightly so, that Christ is busy renewing God's image in the students of our Reformed schools, and if we also say, with emphasis, that the image of God has everything to do with creative, linguistic and rational capacities, then a number of questions beg to be answered. The aforementioned Owen is not a very creative individual; reliable yes, creative no. However,

down the street from Titus Christian School is another, public school, called Brant Elementary. In the Grade 5 class at Brant there is a boy named Arthur. Arthur is a creative genius. He plays piano, and even composes his own music, like the next Mozart. He paints like the next Picasso. He writes poetry like George Herbert was his Dad. But Arthur does not believe in God. Neither do his parents or grandparents. So, how do we explain this? If being created in God's image has much to do with creativity, then how come the Christian boy, Owen, who is being renewed in God's image by the power of the Holy Spirit, is so uncreative, whereas Arthur, the unbeliever, is almost exploding with creativity? Something doesn't add up here. Or if the image of God has everything to do with linguistic and logical faculties, what about the special needs student in the Christian school who has a serious speech impediment and who tends to think in a very erratic and illogic manner? Is the image of God not being successfully renewed in this linguistically and logically challenged child who loves the Lord with all her heart and soul and strength? Again, something doesn't add up there.

So, what shall we do with the doctrine of the image of God as a way of identifying children in the classrooms of our Christian schools? It is true, they are all created in the image of God. It is also true that, because of sin and by nature, they all have nothing more than a few tiny traces of the glorious image left in them. It is also true, that by virtue of the covenant God has made with them, they may be assured that the Holy Spirit promises to work on them, and in them, renewing the image of Christ in them, that is, restoring to them the true righteousness and holiness with which they were originally created in Adam and Eve, our first parents. At the same time, educators must be careful to keep their use of the image of God *within parameters of Scripture*, assisted by the confessions, otherwise they may find themselves stuck in some awkward, and pedagogically unhelpful, quagmires, as we just discovered in problem #3.

Still, even if the image of God does not always do everything that educators want it to do, there is another doctrine that will do more than educators often realize, and that is the doctrine of the covenant. Now, in a way I'm preaching to the choir here. As mentioned early, the statement that ICRE agreed upon in 2004 explicitly identifies children in our schools as *covenant children*. In Hamilton we have the *Covenant* Canadian Reformed Teachers' College. I've read some parts of Reformed school handbooks and especially in the opening, foundational section I see that word "covenant" popping up regularly. So, we identify all these colourful personalities sitting in front of us as *covenant children*, and

therefore ultimately *God's children*. Good. Now what exactly do we mean by that? And how do we use that?

Let's begin with the obvious. This means that their core identity is God-given. It's not parent-given. It's not peer-group-driven. It's not based on history, present circumstance, or future aspirations. All those things are factors, but they are not the foundation. The concrete basis of the identity of every child in Mr. Didaskalos' Grade 5 classroom is God-given. It is from the LORD who says, "I am your God and you are my people. I am your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Jer 30:22; Gen 17:7). And this divine origin of our students' identity immediately has a number of significant implications:

1. *With covenant, the students' identity is stable, even as the LORD who gives it is steadfast.* Identity based on chronology is always shifting and morphing. After all, time is the ever-changing river. But God is the Father of lights "with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Jam 1:17). And the covenant that the LORD makes is nothing short of *everlasting* (Gen 17:7). Personality varies enormously from child to child. But the covenant relationship is both stable and the same for all. Some children are like schooners with a full gust of wind in their sails. They slice right through the waves of every new academic challenge that the curriculum throws at them. Other children are like long-distance swimmers. They strain and they swim, and they strain and swim some more... doing everything within their intellectual power to just keep their heads above water. And sometimes even that's not enough, and get a gulp of sea water in their belly. But their God-given identity is still the same. They're all covenant children. My friends today may become my ex-friends tomorrow, also on the playground. But we're still all God's covenant children. What a pedagogical blessing! Do we still realize that? Do we still reckon with that? Do we still remind our students of this? There's enough chaos in life the way it is. And there's more than enough hurly-burly in a Grade 5 classroom. But through it all, this we know, and this we can count on: all these children are still God's covenant children, and they will be tomorrow, too... and the next day and the next. And you need a teachable atmosphere before you can teach. *Stability* is a key element of any good teachable atmosphere. And that's what covenant does, and it does it in spades. It provides stability.
2. *With covenant, a student knows how he fits it, and the truth is, yes, he belongs.* Covenant is all about relationship. It's the grace-filled relationship between God and us established and mediated through Christ and his blood shed on the cross. In covenant, our Triune God says,

“You belong to me.” And because we all, without discrimination, belong to God, we all also belong to each other. We are *together* in covenant with God. Now, pardon my colloquialism, but brothers and sisters, “That’s huge! That’s really huge!” Especially if you’re in Grade 5, but also if you’re in Grade 11. Because you can have a talented child, and you can have an excellent teacher, and you can have binders full of wonderful engaging curriculum, but if that child feels like an outcast in his class, how will that child thrive in school. Survive? Yes, perhaps. But flourish and thrive? Everyone wants to know that they belong. We are created, but even more so, we are redeemed to be relational. After all, redemption and reconciliation are two sides of the one coin of salvation. And there are children—also children in a Christian school—who feel completely left out. You’ll find them standing back 25 feet from the soccer field at noon hour, wishing that they were playing right-winger... but they’re not. These things happen. And they’re difficult. And they are also academic hindrances. But covenant gives us a basis on which to start addressing these things. Because in a Reformed school, the soccer field does not have the final say. God does. And in his covenant, God says to each and every child: “You belong. You’re part of it. Just as much as everyone else in Grade 5.” Sure, that needs to be worked out, applied, cultivated. But covenant shows us the way to go.

3. *Within the covenant, redemptive history supercedes personal history.* In Mr. Didaskalos’ classroom Robert may be strutting around, performing his antics, and doing everything within his power to get some attention. However, perhaps the deeper truth here is that Robert does not get a whole lot of attention, let alone love, at home. His parents’ marriage is strained. His Dad and Mom are usually so mentally pre-occupied with navigating the choppy waters of their married life that their children are often left to sort things out for themselves. And so, seeing that Robert doesn’t get much attention at home, he grabs for it at school. If you don’t receive it from your parents, maybe you beg for it from your peers. It’s a miserable piece of Robert’s personal history. But with covenant, there’s a much bigger history that needs to be told, and *that Robert himself is part of.* It’s a redemptive history that starts in the Garden of Eden and ends on the streets of the New Jerusalem. It’s a history that includes the likes of Noah and Abraham and Sarai and Isaiah and Mary, as well as Dorcas, Peter, and John. It’s a history that has a gracious present and a glorious future. Are we still teaching our students about redemptive history? Are we telling them that, wonder of wonders, God has included them in the same basic lineage of the forefather Abraham and the apostle Paul? Because then, regardless of what’s going on in the family context—whether good or bad—all students will step

into the classroom knowing that the LORD our God has made them part of something big... something everlasting big! And that's another way in which covenant cultivates a good, positive teaching atmosphere.

4. *With covenant, all students have an obligation to motivation.* It's going without saying that motivated students do better than unmotivated students. Motivated students are also an asset *to the entire class*, while conversely unmotivated students may be a liability *to the entire class*. So, how does Mr. Didaskalos motivate his lethargic uninterested students who are enduring school rather than enjoying it? Well, covenant also helps out there. Because every covenant—by its very nature and essence—has two parts. It's a reciprocal agreement with no one less than God. Yes, as the theologians says, it's one-way in its initiation, but it's two-way in its administration. And the Form for Baptism makes it clear that “every covenant contains two parts: a promise and an obligation.” Teachers try all kinds of different things to motivate unmotivated students. Give them a project on a special topic that they're interested in. Promise them that if they hurry up and get their work done, they can have an extra 15 minutes at recess time. Switch up the pedagogical medium and use a video clip instead of a worksheet. Or, if all else fails, threaten them with some kind of punishment or a trip to the principals' office. All of these, and many more, are in the teacher's toolbox. They are valid and they have their place. But is there not something bigger here? Something hanging in the atmosphere, no, rather permeating the atmosphere. These are covenant children. Being responsive is not an option, it's an obligation. However, perhaps at this point, you are thinking, “Ah yes, but this man at the podium obviously teaches at the theological seminary. There students are motivated. They want to be there. But it's just not that easy in the Grade 5 classroom of Titus Christian School. What is Mr. Didaskalos supposed to say to the unmotivated Michael in his class? Is he supposed to say, “Now, Michael, you are a covenant child. And you know that every covenant has two parts. The second part is an obligation, and part of that obligation is to be motivated about your school work.” To which Michael responds... quietly... with a very blank stare which seems to say, “Nice speech, but I still hate doing math.” Well, you are right. It's not always so easy motivating Grade Fivers... let alone Grade Eighters. But from time to time, we may need to take some time out for a spiritual heart-to-heart with those covenant children who are our students. We may need to side aside the curriculum for 15 minutes, and remind everyone—teacher included—just how zealous the first party of the covenant, God, is when it comes to his very challenging work, which is saving and restoring a bunch of miserable sinners

like you and me. Reminding stubborn sinners to repent, yet again, is not exactly a pleasant task. But our covenant God does it, again and again, with passionate, loving zeal. Just take a quick tour through the minor prophets. Working sanctification in the midst of weak and trouble-filled congregations is not exactly exciting, riveting, headline-grabbing work. It's a lot of spiritually tough slugging. Just read through some of the letters of the apostle Paul. And yet, the risen Christ, who is the mediator of the new covenant, does it with zeal, through his Holy Spirit. And therefore, dear Grade 5, since every covenant contains two parts, you also, as God's covenant children are obligated *in response to this great LORD* to do your work with zeal. Now, let's be realistic. Such a 15 min spiritual tête-à-tête will not instantly solve every motivational deficiency. But it does reinforce a certain atmosphere. A covenantal atmosphere that ought to permeate the air of the Grade 5 classroom. And that's a good atmosphere to begin teaching within.

More could be said, but you already sense the direction in which we are going. Identifying the children in our classroom as God's covenant children does not solve every problem and it does not come out explicitly on every page of resource material. But it is there, and significantly so, by putting a stable foundation underneath the class, by establishing grace-filled, meaningful relationships within the classroom, by establishing an overall, yes, eternal purpose for the classroom, and finally by permeating the very atmosphere with which the class is carried through the various subjects day by day.

From the Baptismal Font Forward...

... to loving the students in front of you

One of the rudiments of good teaching is: you have to love your students. If the teacher is there in front of the class, just putting in time and bringing home a paycheck, the children will know it. You can't pull the wool over their eyes that easily. Conversely, if a teacher does genuinely love his students, that goes such a long way in making for a pleasant and productive atmosphere in the classroom. But... yes, but... some days, and with some students, you're just about ready to start pulling your hair out. And it's hard to love those students who are doing everything within their power to hasten the natural process of balding... (at least that analogy works for the men here, but I'm sure the ladies can identify, if not with the balding, at least with the frustrating students.) But... those frustrating students are covenant children. And the LORD did not make his covenant with delightful, loveable, model citizens. Deut 9:4-6 presents quite a different picture. And yet the Lord's covenant is explicitly and repeatedly

called a “covenant of love” (Deut 7:9,12; 1 Kgs 8:23; 2 Chron 6:14; Neh 1:5; 9:32; Dan 9:4). Love that is rooted in the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ who covers over all of our unloveableness. So, principals, when you have a despondent teacher in your office who is at wit’s end over a student or students, in addition the practical matters, maybe it’s time for a mutual reminder that within the covenant of love God loves all of his children, also the unpleasant ones. He loves them enough to discipline them (Heb 12), but he doesn’t stop loving them. Neither should we.

... to the curriculum you teach each day

Let me give you one example. Perhaps in the workshops more will come up. It’s science class. The unit is about weather, and today’s lesson is about hurricanes. One fact astonishes the class. One hurricane can produce up to 600 trillion watts of energy which is about 200 times the amount of energy that the entire world can presently generate with all of its oil refineries and hydro-electric and nuclear power plants. Wow! 600 trillion watts of energy! And being a Reformed teacher, Mr. Didaskalos does not overlook the opportunity to make the connection to the greatness and the power of God. If that is how mighty a hurricane is, just imagine how all-mighty the Creator is, who upholds and governs all hurricanes. Good. But now one step farther. Those children in front of us are not only creatures of the Creator, they are covenant children of the LORD our God. Therefore, we should also remind them that our Triune God has promised all of us to harness all of his omnipotence and use it for our present and eternal well-being. After all, the Baptism Form does say that this Father-Creator promises “to provide us with all good, and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit.”

... dealing with children’s relationships with each other

It’s inevitable. You were trained to teach curriculum. However, you also end up breaking up two boys who got so mad at each other that they starting punching each other. And all over a nasty slide check on the soccer field. You also end up sorting out a group of girls who are all upset with each other because so-and-so said such-and-such about so-and-so. You were hired to teach curriculum, but you missed the fine print in the contract which says that you’ll also spend more than few hours teach children to relate to their classmates in a wise, pious and godly way. Friendships shift. Loyalties are broken. Emotions erupt. Yet, through it all, as teacher you know—and you will remind your students as well—there is a relationship that supersedes and surrounds all these complex intra-class dynamics... and that relationship is called covenant: the covenant of love, the covenant of grace which will all share together. His relationship with us is the basis for our relationships with each other. Sin makes

relationships tough... really tough. But covenant gives us something to stand on... something to start from.

Wrapping up then, Mr. T.M.P. Vanderven had a point, a very valuable point. When it comes to the enterprise of education, a lot of different things have to come together to help student excel. Committed, conscientious parents. Godly, devoted teachers. Skilled, supportive administrative staff. Solid, Reformed curriculum. Pleasant, well-maintained facilities. And—tip of the hat to tomorrow’s speaker—maybe even a bit of well-chosen technology thrown into the mix. All those factors are important in the enterprise of education. BUT... there’s also that matter of the atmosphere. It may not always be so visible or tangible, but it’s very real and it’s very important. As Vanderven said, “First you have to cultivate a good teachable atmosphere, otherwise you can forget about getting any good teaching done.” Identifying our students as God’s covenant children has implications which stretch far beyond atmosphere, but in many ways, that’s where it starts.

God’s covenant of love lays the foundation underneath our schools; covenant establishes the parameters and clarifies the relationships; covenant initiates the whole endeavour; covenant keeps everyone motivated, also when the chips are down; simply said, covenant creates a certain atmosphere in our schools, and it’s a good one. And if the atmosphere is good, then the conditions are ripe for us to go ahead and get a lot of good teaching done. And that’s what the LORD, our covenant God, has called us to do. May he also strengthen us to fulfill, with delight, the privileged task he has entrusted to us.