

## Pastoral Evaluation of the Family Integrated Church Movement

### Introduction

In Scotland, by the North Sea, the small town of Elgin had simple educational requirements. The directory for the local grammar school required that "upon the Lord's day, masters and scholars shall convene in school at eight o'clock in the morning, and after prayer in the English tongue, the several classes shall be exercised—the seniors in the exposition of a sacred lesson [of the Psalms or catechism]...and the juniors in getting 'by heart' some select English psalms, or the ordinary catechism; they shall return to school in the afternoon at the first bell after sermon, and be exercised till the second bell in reading their sacred lesson..." (Grant, 427).

This requirement is dated 1649. Scotland had Sunday school 131 years before the supposed first Sunday school of Robert Raikes.

This is not an isolated historical incident. Further south in Scotland, the town of Peebles required the local grammar schoolmaster on "each Sunday [to] conveye the said male bairnes at eight hours in the morning and teach them their Sunday's lessons of Scripture and catechizing till the ringing of the second bell to the kirk..." After the second sermon, he is to examine their notes of the sermon and their Sunday's lessons (Strong, 147).

Similar religious training for children can be discovered in other parts of Scotland during the 17th and 18th century. In 1696, the scholars of the Glasgow grammar School were required to attend church worship with their school master; afterward, he would return to school and spend two hours drilling them on the sermon and the catechism. In 1596 the grammar school of Edinburgh the various school regents were required to teach a catechism or Psalms to the students on Sunday. The school of Stirling had similar practices (Strong, 147,78, 84). This was in addition to public recital of the catechism before the church body. And the schoolmaster of Jedburgh, in 1656, was required to instruct his scholars between sermons. In 1674, the master of the grammar school of Dundee had similar requirements. And in 1700, the students of the grammar school of Aberdeen were examined after the second service as to the sermons they listened to that Sunday (Grant, 429).

And this is just what I have dug up on my spare time.

It is already known that catechism instruction was a common practice in all the Reformed churches. The Genevan ordinances of 1541 required that "at midday there is to be catechism, that is instruction of little children in all three churches." Further, it required that all parents send their children to this Sunday class. The Synod of Dordt called upon the church, family and school to cooperate on the catechizing of the covenant children.

So, it should come as no surprise that the New England churches also had Sunday school. The church of Norwich wrote a public covenant in 1676:

"That our Children shall be brought up in the Admonition of the Lord, as in our Families, so in publick; that all the Males who are eight or nine years of age, shall be presented before the Lord in his congregation every Lord's Day to be Catechised, until they be about thirteen years in age. Second. Those about thirteen years of age, both male and female, shall frequent the meetings appointed in private for their instruction, while they continue under family government, or until they are received to full communion in the church" (Colonial Society, 261).

The records of the Springfield, Plymouth, Dorchester and Roxbury churches also record schooling of children on the Lord's Day. The particulars differed. The consistency of the practice is unknown. But it was practiced generations before Raikes popularized his version of it.

An article in the *Congregational Quarterly*, of 1865, made similar remarks, claiming that such schooling on the Sabbath began with John Knox. The article continued:

"These schools are frequently referred to in the records of that Church, and in the biographies of good men connected with it. In 1647, the General Assembly recommended to all universities to take account of their scholars on the Sabbath day of the sermons, and of their lessons in the catechism. John Brown, the godly carrier, had in his day a Sabbath school at Priesthill. It is stated, on the authority of Rev. John Brown, D. D., of Langton, Berwickshire, that Sunday schools were in existence in Glasgow, and other places, in 1707. They were in operation in Glasgow, and other places, in 1759, and also in many places in 1782."

The *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* (of 100 years ago) offered a suggested list of pre-Raikes Sunday schools, including Knox, Joseph Alleine, Joseph Bellamy and 24 others.

Far from being a relatively new innovation of the last 200 years, the Reformed churches have a long history of instructing the youth on the Lord's Day.

### **Credentials:**

But not everyone agrees that the Reformed churches were right in teaching youth on Sunday. Specifically, the family integrated church movement believes that instructing children physically segregated from their parents to be morally suspect at best.

But who am I to talk to you tonight about this movement?

I first encountered the family integrated church movement back in 2006. I found a sister church had signed that confession—a confession that seemed to denounce youth ministries such as Sunday schools. I was told not to sweat it: the confession allowed exceptions so my church

could sign it. I was not convinced so I contacted the National Center for Family Integrated Churches.

The answer I received was clear and unequivocal: “Family segregated Sunday school, youth group, children's church, etc. cannot be viewed as minimal and allowable exceptions--rather, they are diametrically opposed to the very essence of the NCFIC family-integrated vision.”

The email was from a Mr. John Thompson. Unbeknownst to me at the time, he was the first director of the National Center for Family Integrated Churches.

Fast forward to 2011. After I published my first essay on the family integrated church movement at Wes White's website, I got a response from one Ryan Glick. He described himself as one who had served in the National Center for Family-Integrated Churches (NCFIC), worked with Vision Forum Ministries, was an intern and a member of Scott Brown's church. Scott Brown is the current director of the NCFIC.

I pointed asked Ryan Glick if my article was accurate; he responded: “overall, the description was accurate and I greatly appreciate all the references. Some have slammed us and not even attempted to prove that it was so. That said, in all respect, I disagree with much of the analysis.”<sup>1</sup>

He had also showed my article to Scott Brown. And, no, I have never had a public rebuttal of my essay.

I have also directly engaged four pastors on this topic. Three online and one at a symposium hosted by my presbytery in 2012. Their arguments, or evasions, added nothing new to what I will present to you tonight.

Now, let me give a short history of this movement.

### **The Family Integrated Church**

This amorphous movement began a little over a decade ago, probably in 1999 with Eric Wallace's book, *Uniting Church and Home*. However, this movement was not on the Reformed radar until a few years later when Pastor Joseph Morecraft offered a mixed review of the book, critiquing the movement's rejection of Sunday school.

This review was published at patriarchy.org in 2005. By this time the movement had taken its first serious toll on the Presbyterian churches. The owner of patriarchy.org had his PCA church split in two because of this and other related matters. Other churches in his presbytery were adversely affected in various degrees.

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<sup>1</sup> May 5, 2011. Weswhite.net, see the Internet Archive.

However, the true impetus that propelled this movement onto the national stage was the marketing savvy of Doug Phillips. He started the largest organization within this movement: the National Center for Family Integrated Churches (NCFIC). And he promoted it far and wide with yearly conferences, a book and a movie.

But the NCFIC is not the only organization that currently represents this movement. Eric Wallace, of the book *Uniting Church and Home*, has a website and a few conferences. There is a family integrated church directory website hosted by J. Mark Fox, who also has a book on this topic.

These kinds of organizations built upon an idea are not a surprise. The surprise has been the creation of an entire denomination predicated upon the pointed rejection of Sunday schools among other idiosyncratic practices. The Covenant Presbyterian Church (CPC) describes Sunday schools and like instructional programs as "inventions of the modern church"--by *modern*, presumably, they also included the Scottish Sunday schools of the 1600s.

To best understand this movement, it is best to understand the largest group of this movement: the National Center for Family Integrated Churches (NCFIC).

### **What the NCFIC believes**

The NCFIC boasts over 800 churches as part of its movement. It was created by Vision Forum over a decade ago. It was part of the Vision Forum website until 2009. Both organizations had the same board members. All the board members are Baptists. The NCFIC, among other things, is about "uniting church and home." But what does that mean?

It means an embracing of family-integration and a rejection of family-segregation. Family-integration is a broad belief that includes traditional views of fatherly leadership, family worship and familial nurture. It also includes a unique view of parental involvement. Parents, fathers in particular, are to be so involved in their children's education that the use of non-parental instructors is *virtually* forbidden. The vast majority of group activities are to be family activities.

This view naturally compliments their belief in the rejection of family-segregated activities. If, as a rule, activities of the church are to be attended by the entire family, then Sunday School and youth groups are anathema. *Virtually* any discipleship activity that physically separates children from children (age-segregation) and children from parents (family-segregation) is roundly denounced. Note the word *virtual*. I will get back to that word.

The frequently asked question section of their website also explains: "We do not believe that family-integration is the only—or even the primary—issue in selecting or establishing a local church. But it is unquestionably a defining issue of our day..."

The Center offers a directory of like-minded churches. The directory is for family integrated churches to advertise and for families to find them. The directory is partly designed to help with the “working for the planting of Christ-centered, biblically ordered, evangelistic, expository preaching, family-integrated churches.”

Since at least 2003, to register with their church directory, an appropriate representative of the church must click “yes” next to the question “Are you in substantial agreement with the NCFIC confession.” Next they are asked “Which parts of the confession do you not agree with?” In the frequently asked questions section, the Center reminds churches: “Churches are listed on the NCFIC site by indicating that the church is in agreement with the NCFIC confession. We hear from time of a church that may not completely reflect everything in the confession. While we wish this were not so, we encourage churches to be honest about their true convictions and practices.”

Churches are not officially endorsed and denominational affiliation is no barrier to enrollment. There are all types of churches on the directory: 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist churches, charismatic churches, Baptist churches, paedocommunion churches, father-led communion churches and Orthodox Presbyterian Churches. Although not a church planting agency, it wants to “encourage new church plants” based upon this family-integration model. Presumably, the vast arrays of different churches have this model in common.

The introduction of the confession gives this stated purpose: “Our fervent prayer is that our God will raise up Spirit-filled, Christ-centered, family-integrated assemblies from the ashes of our man-centered, family fragmenting churches.”

The confession, organization and leadership have many commendable characteristics. The confession includes a laudable rejection of children’s worship services and affirmations of parental responsibility. The confession also points to the importance of personal relationships, especially in everyday familial settings.

The organization over the years has used conferences to encourage families, and fathers in particular, to own up to their responsibilities as educators of their children. Catechism usage is highlighted in several blog postings.

And there is no doubt that the current leader of the center, Scott Brown, is zealous for family reformation. He wrote a book called a *Weed in the Church*. And he helped created a movie, called *Divided*. He has published some puritan works on family life as well.

But the NCFIC is about more than integrating families.

The Center is closely aligned with and assumes certain beliefs that are not clearly articulated in their confession. These include homeschooling and what has been called “biblical patriarchy.” The patriarchy confession, the Tenants of Biblical Patriarchy, was produced by Vision Forum and linked to the NCFIC site until about a year ago. Both of these views align nicely with their unique take on family-integration: *keep the family together by means of the fathers’ discipling the children at home.*

### **The distinguishing element of the NCFIC<sup>2</sup>**

But what are the distinguishing marks of the family integrated church movement? It cannot be the belief in parental responsibility, catechetical instruction or even a desire for more family-oriented activities—as good as these are. These are beliefs common with a host of other conservative Christian parachurch organizations. What chief characteristic makes the NCFIC stand out?

It is the strident denunciation of youth ministries such as Sunday school. In particular it is any and all educational events that physically separate children from parents and use age as an organizing element. Article XI of the Center’s public confession sums up their view:

“We affirm that there is no scriptural pattern for comprehensive age segregated discipleship, and that age segregated practices are based on unbiblical, evolutionary and secular thinking which have invaded the church.”

While the confession never uses the words “Sunday school” and the like, the practice and logic is clear: 1. “age segregated practices are based on unbiblical, evolutionary and secular thinking”; 2. modern Sunday schools are age segregated; therefore, they are based on “evolutionary and secular thinking.” This conclusion is reinforced through the words of their leaders, their book and their movie as demonstrated in the following points.

1. The original founder and long-standing board member, in his lecture on the history of Sunday school, Mr. Phillips, declared that today’s church has “an entirely new hierarchy of social groups based on age: . . . dayschools . . . adolescence . . . PMS for women of certain age . . . these are all variations of *evolutionary hellish thinking*.”<sup>3</sup>
2. The current president, Mr. Brown, summarized the sin of age-segregation as “...the church has usurped authority from the family by training youth through Sunday schools and youth groups, whereas the Bible commits the training of children to their parents.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On September 2, 2015 Scott Brown meet with several ministers of the Presbytery of the Dakotas. Although a semi-private meeting, I can say that what I write about the beliefs of the NCFIC are accurate.

<sup>3</sup> Track 2, *The History of the Sunday School Movement*, Doug Phillips; track 13, post-Civil War era. Emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> The Sufficiency of Scripture and Family Integration, NCFIC.org, May 20, 2013.

3. Mr. Brown further states, "We maintain that man sins by adding to or subtracting from the ways that the Bible says that youth are to be gathered, evangelized, and instructed." Age-segregation is a "serious matter," a "serious error."<sup>5</sup>
4. The defining book of the NCFIC, *A Weed in the Church*, written by Mr. Brown, is an extended treatment of this serious charge.
5. The movie, *Divided*, produced by the NCFIC, "discovers the shockingly sinister roots of modern, age-segregated church programs..." With fewer nuances than the book and greater rhetorical flourish, the movie apparently condemns any church program not in alignment with its own views.

This is *the* hallmark of the NCFIC. In the public's eye this is the face of the NCFIC . After all, the NCFIC did not aggressively promote a book or produce a movie whose titles or main themes were positive. They were both primarily critiques about age and family-segregation.

I think more quotes are in order to show the depth of this rejection and denunciation of non-parental instruction of children. It is the very essence of the organization. No individual or church can identify themselves with this movement without identifying with its distinctive.

His book, *A Weed in the Church*, has too many quotes to read, but this one sums up an attitude common to him and his organization: "We believe that age-segregated youth ministry is the *result* of apostasy in the church."<sup>6</sup>

He is too nice to say that my church has apostatized. But what other conclusion can I draw?

He argues that Sunday school is wrong because "this structure cannot be found anywhere in the Bible. It is not commanded in Scripture. It is not demonstrated in Scripture. Our modern method for training children has no basis in God's Word."<sup>7</sup>

In one article, he offers a false dilemma between churchly and parental instruction of the youth:

"And, even when the Sunday school teacher tried to get the parents involved, it never worked. This is normal in our churches, but we need to realize that this condition causes a heinous crime to be committed against God's order for the church and the family. God never intended for children to be trained by Sunday school teachers. He specifically gave this responsibility to fathers. The scriptures are perfectly clear: children should be trained in spiritual matters by

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<sup>5</sup> How Important Is the Issue of Age Segregation?, NCFIC.org, Blog, Nov. 10, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> P.43.

<sup>7</sup> The Sufficiency of Scripture at Work in the Family-Integrated Church, ScottBrownOnline.com, June 28, 2011.

their fathers. The father is the delivery system of the news of kingdom of God and when you bypass him, you kill the messenger. And without a preacher, how will they hear?”<sup>8</sup>

In another posting he summarizes the dangers of using youth ministries and not following the positive patterns of Scripture: “Our failure to obey the word of God in ministry to youth is of enormous significance for the prosperity of the church...we are systematically sending our young people on the path of destruction. It is fracturing our families. It is corrupting our churches. It is destroying the next generation.”<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, in a little-known book, *Family Reformation*, Scott Brown denigrates the Sunday catechetical efforts of Calvin. He writes that his Sunday catechetical program,

“displaced the discipleship which was designed for the home...Calvin’s experience in this area reminds us of the concerns of ministers, which gave rise to modern youth ministry, when fathers did not obey the Lord in matters of shepherding their families...When fathers refuse to play their roles as the teacher and shepherds of their families, the church often does the same thing Calvin did—it steps in and attempts to pick up the slack through a class or program designed to engage the youth. Even though these practices are well-intentioned, they still overthrow the biblical methods of ministry to children. The problems of youth groups that Calvin faced are the same ones we face today. Gathering youth together without the mentorship of their parents and the relationships of the wider body of the church has always been problematic. It naturally displaces the roles of fathers and exposes the family to other unintended problems.”<sup>10</sup>

This long list of quotes is also needful for the many times I have encountered pastors and ruling elders who somehow think that Scott Brown and his organization are not really about eradicating Sunday school and youth ministries. The NCFIC is dead-set against Sunday schools.

### **An Analysis of the NCFIC's claims**

I have already pointedly praised certain practices and emphases of this movement and of the NCFIC in particular. It is only natural that I hone my analysis of the NCFIC's distinguishing claims.

The two primary claims I will analysis and critique are the historical claim and the theological claim. These claims are not unique to the NCFIC. They are wide-spread throughout the movement.

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<sup>8</sup> How the Church can Prepare Men to Be Family Shepherds, HopeBaptistChurch.info, Article.

<sup>9</sup> How Can a Church Build Strong Families? Aug. 9, 2011, ScottBrownOnline.com.

<sup>10</sup> *Family Reformation*, 80, 2009, online; promoted at SWRB, Spring 2013; endorsed by Beeke.

## Historical Claims

The historical claim is a narrative common in both homeschooling and family integrated circles: everyone used to homeschool—tutors and teachers were rare to non-existent; no one ever practiced youth ministries until the 1800s.

It is important to remember that although the word “age-segregation” is the buzz-word for this movement that is only one aspect of a larger concern of parental responsibility. They are concerned about children being physically segregated from their parents. So, if it can be proven that the Christian family and church as whole consistently used instructors other than parents, then this historical claim falls flat.

And fall flat it does. Here is a summary of dozens of resources on the history of Christian education:

### ***A Short History of Christian Education***

Schooling, that formal period of time set aside for instruction, has been the mainstay of societies for millennia. This is especially true in the Christian community.

Christians have used various types of schooling since inception. This has included schooling at home by parents, relatives or tutors, schooling by teachers at another location, and schooling overseen by parents, local communities or by the church. No one method was deemed the correct approach.

Early church bishops were encouraged to house young men to train them for future ministry in the church. They were commanded to instruct the youth in the Bible and basic subjects. Churches taught religious instruction to young and old alike, dividing the larger groups into classes. Monasteries, cathedrals and even guilds would have schools. Church councils ordered the erection of schools.

The records are very spotty given the lack of centralized communities, the distance of time and the ravages of war and poverty. What little that is available shows that during the Middle Ages, “poorer children, even if they or their parents were favorable to reading, might have to postpone the undertaking until adolescence or adulthood, and might not begin at all” (Professor Orme).

By the late Medieval period, useful numbers began to appear in England’s population of 2.5 million: a typical English town had at least one schoolmaster; London had at least two dozen full-time teachers. From 1480-1660, at least 800 new schools alone were created in England.

The Reformation redoubled these educational efforts. Geneva erected the *schola privata* which divided the young into seven grades, admitting children as young as six. Most stayed in each

grade a year. The Scots, Dutch, French, Polish and Hungarian churches either ordered, created and some even operated schools for children. Catechizing was emphasized once again.

The Puritans strongly endorsed schooling of all types. As historian Edmund Morgan summarized: “the diversity of forms of elementary training—and its chronic lack of endowment—led Puritans as well as their contemporaries to rely heavily on the household for instruction in literacy at the same time as they encouraged the founding of schools....”

New England passed the famous Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647, which required the erection of elementary and grammar schools. The typical New England child would begin instruction before age six, attending a local Dame school wherein an older woman (usually widowed) would teach the rudiments. He may then move on to other schools, tutors and subjects. It was common for the schoolmasters to teach the catechisms as well. At times, such catechizing was furthered through assemblies of the children, not unlike Sunday school. And many Puritan churches segregated the family during worship services.

By 1800 many state constitutions explicitly provided for schools to one degree or another. Boston had over half of the children in some type of school. The state of New York had similar statistics in 1799. Schools were endorsed by Cotton Mather, the Synod of New York and Philadelphia and various leaders. Thus by 1840 when the first census included schooling statistics, it appears that nearly 60% of the children in America attend some type of academy, private school or public school at one time or another.

I have not covered all the historical claims. There is some egregious mishandling of the historic data that I document in my book. But it is clear that homeschooling and every other method of schooling have peacefully coexisted for centuries. The instruction of youth with and without parents has been practiced for centuries as well. *The modern family integrated church movement is not following history.*

### **Theological Claims**

The strongest argument against youth ministries by the NCFIC is a hermeneutical argument rooted in a misunderstanding of Sola Scriptura. They claim that Sola Scriptura logically leads to family integrated churches, if one is to be faithful to the Word of God. If this theological claim fails, the entire system collapses.

### ***The “Regulative Principle of Discipleship”***

Scott Brown and others follow what I dub the “regulative principle of discipleship” or education. It comes from several assertions in his book and in online articles. Assertions such as:

“From the Scriptures themselves we only see one pattern of celebration, worship, instruction and discipleship for the people of God.... To be biblical we must be able to point to the Scriptures and affirmatively find the matter anchored within the Word of God. Then and only then can we say that something is biblical.”<sup>11</sup>

What exactly is Scott Brown saying? The clearest statement of this belief is in an online blog posting from 2011. It is in this posting that he makes his most systematic, theological argument against age and family-segregated practices, even more so than in his book:

“While we do observe in the film that the modern form of systematic, age-segregated youth ministry has neither precept nor example to support it in either the Old Testament or the New Testament, we do not rest our argument on this fact alone. What is more important—and this is the main point we want to make—is that all the positive commands and examples in Scripture call for the practice of age-integrated worship and discipleship in the church and the responsibility of parents to disciple their own children.”<sup>12</sup>

He continues: “The Bible is clear about this matter, and it gives the full range of that teaching including who, where, why, what, and when....When you split youth up according to age, you are doing something that is contrary to the explicit, revealed commands and patterns of Scripture...”<sup>13</sup>

What should we make of these claims?

There are two claims: negative and positive. The negative claim is that, for example, Sunday school (as commonly practiced) is not in the bible. Therefore, it is wrong.

What is the rebuttal to this? It is simple: why do we have to find an example in the bible? Scott Brown never answers that question. It is merely an assertion.

The positive claim is that the bible only offers age-integrated worship, instruction and discipleship. But is this true? No. There is no command that states: “children should *only* be family integrated for instruction,” neither in so many words nor by syllogistic reasoning. Not one.

As for the practices of the bible, why should these limit the option for teaching and discipleship? Even if we were to grant this unproven assertion, the examples offered are not specific enough to determine exactly *how* the meetings of instruction were arranged. Did the wives sit with the husbands? Did nursemaids watch over the infants? Did families even sit with

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<sup>11</sup> “How to Determine If 'Youth Group' Is Even Biblical,” The Christian Post, Sept. 23, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Air Conditioners and Microphones Aren't in the Bible Either?, NCFIC.org, blog, August 2, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

each other? The texts do not say, except Nehemiah 8: 2: “both men and women and all who could understand what they heard”—which is pleaded away into an insignificant “exception.” But history tells us that during the time of Christ, families were segregated in the temple worship. Where is the New Testament outrage for this practice?

Now, the question may come up: what about microphones? Or television? Or computers?

Scott Brown has an answer: that which are the “practical aspects of church life” do not need positive warrant. They don’t count. But he offers no syllogistic reasoning or biblical passage to prove this slippery distinction—because there is no distinction. I can claim that age-segregation is a “practical aspect of church life.” So, I’ve bypassed his prohibition. His distinction is arbitrary.

*But let us back up here and look at the forest instead of the trees.* Earlier Scott Brown wrote that there are no examples or commands of age-segregated youth ministries in the Bible. So they should not be practiced. He then continued to assert that the examples and commands that are in the Bible all point toward family-integrated discipleship activities. To practice age-segregation is to act contrary to the positive commands of God.

Does this hermeneutical principle sound familiar? Let me put it in more familiar language:

All methods and means of discipleship invented by the brain of man without God’s own express commandment is wrong.

Does that language sound familiar? It should, I took it straight from John Knox’s defense of the regulative principle of worship (RPW). When all his words are stripped of their verbiage, this is the hermeneutical position Scott Brown is taking. It is the RPW applied to Christian discipleship and instruction. This is what drives his rhetoric and reasoning.

And there is no Christian liberty in this viewpoint. This is what he means, what his organization means and what his confession means. It is what all the signers of the NCFIC confession are supposed to mean.

But the matter does not end there. ***Mr. Brown does allow for age-segregation!***

In his book, *A Weed in the Church*, he writes: “There are times when it may be appropriate for various ages of people to meet for specific purposes.”<sup>14</sup>

**Then what is the whole debate about?** Why is this exception not placed at the beginning of the argument? Where is it in the NCFIC confession?

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<sup>14</sup> *A Weed in the Church*, 231, cp. 61.

Has the entire decade-long debate been over how much age-segregation is allowed? If so, how much does Mr. Brown think is allowable?

Very little it seems. He writes: "However, this is not to be the normative pattern of biblical youth discipleship, but rather an exception." A glimpse of what an exception may look like is offered on page 225 of his book wherein he contends that as "little as one hour a week" of age-segregation is "problematic" for those wishing biblical felicity.

In other words, 1/168 of a week is still too radical to contemplate. That is .006% of a child's week! What Mr. Brown gives in one hand is virtually taken away by the other.

This is why I used the word *virtual*. For all practical purposes, and certainly in practice, youth ministries are forbidden.

### ***The Desert Island Test***

Another way to understand their hermeneutical approach is with what I call the "Desert Island Test." This is how Doug Phillips put the case:

"[If all you had was the Bible on a desert island] . . . would you naturally conclude that you should fragment children along age-groups and put them in grade-based classroom . . . would you see a foundation . . . would you see a pattern, would *there be any ground, any refuge in God's Word that leads you to mimic this approach?*"<sup>15</sup>

Scott Brown similarly argues without a desert island but with only the bible:

"If all we only had the bible as our guide, would children be separated from their parents during the meetings of the church?...Are there any commands or examples to follow in Scripture for age segregation?"<sup>16</sup>

Such a naïve hermeneutic permeates the movement. It is just that Phillips and Brown have articulated better than others. Now we can see what they mean by *Sola Scriptura*; they mean *Solo Scriptura*.

This is one way they have attracted over 800 churches in America: they reiterate, repeat and remind people that they are the true heirs of the Reformation, consistently following *Sola Scriptura*. It is to the Bible they return and call others to with their pied piper allurements. As Scott Brown said in one interview on Generations Radio, "We are really advocating

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<sup>15</sup> Track 13, *The History of the Sunday School Movement*, Doug Phillips,

<sup>16</sup> p.167.

confessionalism in this movement. Whether you are a baptist or a Presbyterian we are encouraging really a return to the historic doctrines of the Christian faith."<sup>17</sup>

He may think that. But history and good hermeneutics is solidly against his position.

So, whenever you hear them end their argument with the finality of “the bible alone says...,” remember the desert island test—remember, they are asserting *Solo* Scriptura not *Sola* Scriptura.

The conclusion of the matter is that historically and theologically the movement has nothing to stand upon beyond repeated assertions, shallow research and **a nascent legalistic hermeneutic created whole-cloth out of a misunderstanding of *Sola Scriptura*.**

### **Other Concerns**

I do not want to give you the impression that the only problem with the family integrated church movement, and the NCFIC in particular, is their rejection of youth ministries. There are other beliefs that are of concern. One such concern is the view of the importance of the parent.

In the flagship book of the NCIFC, *A Weed in the Church*, Scott Brown gives several pages of reasoning against even one hour of Sunday School in a spiritually healthy church. His final argument is that youth ministry “overthrows biblical jurisdiction...if God thought that systematic, age-segregated ministry for youth were good or helpful, He would have prescribed it. We know that Deuteronomy 6 and Ephesians 6 speak clearly regarding whose job it is to teach children. God has appointed this responsibility to only one kind of person—a father.”<sup>18</sup>

With such language, he undercuts pastor-led catechism classes and Christian schools, let alone youth ministries.

This misunderstanding of judicial boundaries seems reflected in their confession in articles IX and X where the family is labeled the “primary” nurturing institution, especially for children.

The family-centric nature of this movement is verified by one Reformed pastor who attended a number of lectures on fatherhood by the NCFIC last year: “There was some good mixed in there to be sure. But I would have been fine with missing the whole thing, because there was loads of crap! Brown said that the most important ingredient for evangelization of the world is fathers, and their theme was forced into one biblical passage after another. It became absolutely confirmed in my mind that this was an obsession with these people, and they are

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<sup>17</sup> Discipleship vs. Vacation Bible Schools - 40 Years of Youth Ministry-A Total Disaster, Interview, Generations Radio, Sept. 27, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> p.229.

much more about ‘what we do and don't do’ than about the Gospel of God's saving and sanctifying grace through Christ.”

### **Pastoral Considerations of the Movement**

My pastoral reflections come from my own experience with family integrated churches, their leadership and their members both in person and online.

There are things to be learned from the movement and there are many things to be concerned about.

### **Learning from the FIC Movement**

As with many movements that over-react to wrong situations, the FIC movement has good elements that can remind us of truths we may have forgotten. This means we should take the call to family integration seriously. But how?

Well, there is a type of niche-marketing, age-segregated, youth-oriented, family segregating, anti-Christian spirit of this age. And I had to use all these adjectives to try to describe it. It is not the simple use of age-segregation, or schools or youth camps as such. These are adiaphora. These are tools that should be used within the parameter of Christian liberty. And used within the environment of Gospel preaching.

At the same time, families and churches are free not to use age-segregation of any type. And free to keep their children with them in any and all events. And that may even be the best way given the circumstances of the family, church or both. But that is a case-by-case call that should not be codified in some non-Presbyterian public confession.

Here are some more suggestions:

For the family: Spend more time with each other. Be acutely aware of the effects technology upon the integrity of the family: TV, computer, and smart phones. Ask your children questions about the movies they watched or the book they read. Exemplify a life that takes God’s church, word and worship seriously. Regular family time is a must. And avoid such a busy life that the important private and family worship are neglected. Teach them the Law and the Gospel.

For the church: do not over-schedule events for the family or youth. Know your families. Is there knowledge of the Law and the Gospel? Do they know the difference? Help them with family worship and prioritization of God’s law. Reinforce parental authority and love. At the same time, do not forget your responsibility to instruction the Christian family and apply it to the young and old alike. The churches of old have always, at their best, been schools of Christian education.

For both: Titus 2 calls the mature women to help instruct the less experienced. Similarly, the older men should instruct the younger men. And that includes youth that are not your own children. Every member of the Body of Christ is called to help the other members. No member and no family is an island. Take a few young men out to lunch and ask about their lives. It is a fact of life that children and youth of a family usually open up to those outside the family. And those people should be the mature members of the Church.

But above all, remember that the integration of church and family must be rooted in the Gospel and not in some method.

This movement also calls us to take seriously the question: “Where does the responsibility and priority lie between the Session and the head of the household?”

The historical answer to this question, in my own study at any rate, seems to be: this is the wrong question.

In his rousing speech in favor of parochial schools, Charles Hodge made no bones that the average family was in need of help. They could not be depended upon to give the full range of instruction needful for a Christian education. And since the common schools of the 1840s were not acceptable places of Christian nurture, then the church must create schools. In contrast, Breckenridge and Thornwell thought this approach undermined the spirituality of the Church. So, they proposed that they stick with the common schools but make sure that good Christian education occurs therein. Neither of them placed the church and family against each other.

This is too short a lecture and too deep a question to fully answer this question of jurisdiction. Some suggested directions for the answer can be found in the various practices of the Bible and church history. In 2 Chronicles 17, King Jeoshaphat sent teachers throughout the land. And, historically, the relationship between state and education has been close. Further, Samuel was virtually adopted by the priest Eli. Such a strange event to our minds seemed to not faze the Israelites of that time. So, too, in church history bishops housed students and the apprentice-model was widely used.

Historically, the integration of the church and family for education has been of a type not comprehended by this new movement. The families acutely felt their need of help and did not protest the loving assistance of God’s church.

### **Dangers of the Family Integrated Church Movement**

The dangers of this 800-church movement are real. They are two-fold: doctrinal and practical.

I have found the FIC movement, and the NCFIC in particular, lacking both in sound, well-articulated and consistent theological arguments and substantial, historical research.

The doctrinal dangers should be clear now. Resting upon a nascent legalistic hermeneutic—what I call the “regulative principle of discipleship”—the arguments offered by the NCFIC in particular can and has moved people toward a law-centric lifestyle that has little toleration for dissent. Their confession reflects this intolerant and critical attitude by denigrating all the Reformed churches that practice the centuries-long instructional institution of Sunday catechizing. Remember: if your church has Sunday school it is declared to be “based upon unbiblical, evolutionary and secular thinking.” That includes Calvin’s Geneva.

This strident attitude can be seen especially in their movie, *Divided*. Go ahead and just watch the first 20 minutes. It’s free online. Better yet, go and watch the 2 minute feature videos like the one labeled “Hope for the Future.” There the speaker claims the FIC churches are the ones truly building the kingdom of God and the other churches are just losing their children, ruining their churches and ruining society. He then challenges his detractors with a less-than-humble declaration: “Sure we have detractors. People are poopooing what we are doing. I get that all the time, constantly. But I say 'hey, just wait 20, 30 years we'll see what your fruit is and we'll see what our fruit is. We'll see what happens in 30 years...you can have your youth groups and Sunday schools and things. But we're going to eat vegetables for 20 years, 30 years, we'll see what happens.”

The practical danger can be seen in the divisiveness caused by this movement within the small Reformed communities. One church has already brought a complaint against another church for signing their confession that denigrates the ministry of the local church by calling youth groups and the like as “based on unbiblical, evolutionary and secular thinking.” Some churches have been virtually split over the matter. Others have felt undue pressure upon themselves and families. While many more lose potential members to yet another minor issue to eat at the foundations of church unity.

There are four ways the NCFIC undermines confessional Reformed churches. These can be found in the FAQ section of their website. **First**, they point people to FIC churches first: “Christians who are seeking a church, we recommend you use our Church Directory to find a family-integrated church or network with other like-minded Christians to start one.” Whether 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist, Charismatic, Arminian, paedocommunion—it doesn’t matter as long as they are family integrated. **Second**, they readily work with churches that are open to their viewpoint, whether confessional or not. Thus they are an opposing influential force to Reformed churches trying to help non-Reformed churches be faithful. **Third**, they encourage members in *your* church to “graciously and winsomely try to bring about change from within through respectful appeal to your leaders. This has the potential to transform many lives, the lives of some of the people you care about the most.” **Fourth**, the NCFIC has as its stated goal to “encourage new church plants.”

My own experience and the report of others paint a picture of secluded churches keeping themselves aloof from those who have Sunday school. I know of young men who, after watching the movie *Divided*, became dissatisfied with their church and moved out of state to a family integrated church whose pastor was in the movie. I know of a family whose father was a pastor that was so engrossed by the movement he moved across country to join Scott Brown's church. I would encourage you to read Karen Campbell's personal experience in planting three FIC churches on here website, thatmom.com.

This movement is contrary to the received practices of the church universal. Recall Scot Brown's denigration of Calvin's catechetical classes. It limits Christian liberty in the area of Christian nurture and education by calling for a blanket removal of methods that are indifferent in themselves (*adiaphora*).

The alienating and divisive nature of their confession is seen in what it says about your church: "We deny that the church should continue as she has [**How? with her family-fragmenting ministries of course**] and delay dramatic reformations, or that she will escape the wrath of God for the disintegration and destruction of the family by ignoring or taking lightly biblical roles and responsibilities."

But, perhaps, the more divisive nature of the movement is the doctrinal and emotional claim that it is part of a revival of God. And in some circles, it is claimed to be a fulfillment of Malachi 4.

### **Family Integration as Revival**

The idea that the family integrated church movement is a revival and a reformation of the church is a significant claim from leaders of this movement. The claim is broad sweeping. Consider one NCFIC blog posting which announced: "the family-integrated movement is addressing fundamental problems with our social systems that has worked to destroy the church in the west over a thousand years."<sup>19</sup>

How is the family integrated movement fixing a thousand years of problematic social systems? By fixing the family. Scott Brown in a recent blog posting asserted: "I continue to be convinced that the revival of biblical family life is one of the most pressing needs of our era for the spread of the gospel. Why? God has designed the family to be the first place the gospel is preached and heard in a human being's life. If the family is in spiritual disarray, then the communication of the gospel is compromised."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Kevin Swanson on the SOS [Sufficiency of Scripture]—Addressing a Crying Need in the 21st Century Church, NCFIC, blog, Nov. 12, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> A Common Tragedy in Family Life-The Gospel is Not Heard, NCFIC blog, Jan. 14, 2014.

“Progressively, and often unwittingly, the church has taken over the father’s role and given it to preachers, women, Sunday school teachers, and childcare workers. I believe that until fathers take their jobs back, there will be no reformation.”<sup>21</sup>

Consider the founder and long-time leader and board-member, Doug Phillips, who claimed that the FIC and homeschooling were twin revivals.

"Home educators, almost by definition, have turned their heart to their children [Mal. 4] . . . So there’s been a revival that’s taking place in the heart of these homeschool families. And this revival works itself out to the local church . . . our prayer: every Christian in the world is in a family integrated church. And there should be nothing but that, but you know what that is going to lead to? That’s going to lead to people homeschooling!"<sup>22</sup>

In Scott Brown’s book, *Family Reformation*, wherein he uses the life and times of Calvin and the city of Geneva as a springboard to offer advice, he lists twelve signs of family reformation occurring today. The list includes important characteristics such as a “right understanding of the gospel,” doctrinal awareness and expository preaching. But the list of the modern reformation includes two more characteristics that the Reformation fathers would not have recognized: homeschooling and family integrated churches.

He writes: “Over the past decade, there has been significant upheaval in established churches over questions regarding age segregated church life, the methods and philosophy of modern youth ministry, and the distinctive roles of fathers and mothers in the church. This is coupled with a wave of church planting which features many of the above signs of awakening incorporated into everyday church life. This methodology of family integration rejects the age segregated and feministic church models of the last half century as modern inventions.”<sup>23</sup>

Brothers, imagine the effect upon weak and struggling consciences when they are told that family integrated churches are part of a revival of God? Would they not naturally conclude that the other churches are not part of this new reformation? Would they not become dissatisfied with your church for not taking such a stand?

It is even worse when you consider the typical evangelical that this movement appeals to. The Barna Group and the Pew Study have shown over and over again high-percentage of Christians either classified as born-again or Evangelicals who deny cardinal truths of the Word or are just in rank biblical ignorance. And I do not believe for a moment that homeschoolers are somehow

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<sup>21</sup> Returning to Biblical Order in the Church and the Home, NCFIC.org, Resources.

<sup>22</sup> Phillips, quoted from “The Family-Integrated Church Movement,” interview, *Generations Radio*, sermonaudio.com, June 12, 2006. This broadcast is favorably referenced by the NCFIC blog, January 21, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> *Family Reformation #7* Legacy of Sola Scriptura in Calvin's Geneva, Hope for the Future, Sermonaudio.com, 2013.

immune to this widespread problem. When these kinds of people hear this message, they are just being set up for spiritual pain.

### **Working with FIC Members in an Non-FIC Church**

How should church leaders of a traditional Reformed church interact with members who may be family integrated church proponents or attracted towards it?

One thing is to know the family. It seems that many families are attracted to FIC churches because the churches share certain things in common with these families: they homeschool; they have a large family; they are social conservatives; and they emphasize the integrity of the family against the rise of a post-Christian America. Many have little to no confessional understanding of the bible.

In such cases show them love. And then after that more love and some doctrine. Teach them the basics and essentially ignore their predisposition toward this new movement. This is how one of our families was protected from the nascent legalism of Scott Brown's book.

The father of that family recently told me this. He was attracted to *A Weed in the Church*. The repetitive insistence by Scott Brown that he is just following the bible seems to hypnotize my friend's mind. What protected him from such a confused outlook? A solid and balanced Reformed church. He said that while attending Providence he was learning that the Reformed faith gives solid, deeply-researched answers whereas the book, and many like it in his experience, just dogmatically asserts their positions.

My experience in homeschooling circles can be of help as well. Recall that the FIC is closely aligned with homeschooling. And one of the dangers of conservative homeschoolers is legalism. I wrote an article about it that attracted some responses. People emailed me, identifying with the nascent or virtual legalism I described in my essay. And it helped them resist the allurements of legalism.

For a few years I assisted homeschoolers in organizing a Homeschool Day at the Capital in Denver. It was a way to remind politicians of the rights of homeschoolers. In one of the organizational meetings, someone voiced a concern that the Gospel was not being presented enough. But other people offered the evidence of many speakers over the years who explained how to homeschool, nurture children, or be politically active.

As nice as I could say it, I pointed out that this was all Law and no Gospel. I spent the next twenty minutes explaining the difference to a room with a high percentage of family integrated church members.

In another incident, I had a father of another church family attracted to the radical homeschool elements. I gave him my essay on the history of Christian education—there in my new book. He read it. Afterward, he told me that it helped put things into perspective for him. He still preferred homeschooling but was less strident about it and more comfortable with other approaches.

So, the advice I would offer is three-fold: be a faithfully confessional church—both in love and doctrine—help people fight legalism, if that is a problem—and give them the true facts.

It is this last point that undergirds my lecture here and my book. The leaders of this movement present themselves as accomplished theologians and historians; Doug Phillips was especially guilty of this. But they are not.

To help protect your church families from the radical elements of FIC, take a Sunday school class or two and go over the history of Christian education. Or be more pointed and explain the pluses and minus of the FIC movement. If you teach church history, incorporate the details of life, such as schooling and Sunday school in Scotland.

When talking with a church pastor who promotes this new movement, take time to find out what he really believes. Many, in my experience, do not fully understand the NCFIC's position. You may have to be specific. **It is not enough to ask if they allow Sunday school, for example. I've heard men say yes, but their yes is the same yes of Scott Brown—it virtually means no.**

### **Where is the movement going?**

The movement is slowly moving mainstream even as it is unpacking its own logic in new and unhelpful ways.

For the later part of the 2000s, the movement, and the NCFIC in particular, has included Voddie Baucham, Douglas Phillips, R.C. Sproul, Jr., Geoffrey Botkin. All four were in the NCFIC's movie, *Divided*.

With men such as Joe Morecraft and Joel Beeke speaking at the NCFIC conferences, the movement has gained some credibility. Scott Brown has several articles at the Christian Post online website. His books, movie and conferences are found in various homeschooling organizations such as Christian Home Educators of Colorado, CHEC, and the Missouri homeschool organization.

Scott Brown tirelessly hosts many conferences over the year. The way the movement spreads, primarily, I think, is by such conferences on less controversial topics. It is more of a back-door evangelism approach. But even then, the radical elements still show.

Where is the movement going? It started with family integrated schooling (homeschooling), then family integrated churches and now family economics. Last year the president of the NCFIC endorsed a family economics conference. The blog posting stated: "Consider this question: Does your family have a biblical, family-integrated vision for work, financial management, inheritance, tithing, mentorship/higher education, hospitality, care for aging parents, roles for older daughters in the home, health care, and the countless other decisions you will face?" It continues, "Now families are looking at the entire family economy as a critical element in this family reformation. Without re-integrating family economies, it becomes difficult to re-integrate the family in the other areas... Since the industrial revolution, the capitalist corporations and socialist systems have slowly displaced the family economy. Many fathers are not able to disciple their sons and daughters effectively because the economic sphere."<sup>24</sup>

So, integrating the family means school at home, Sunday school at home, and now businesses at home.

## **Conclusion**

I have covered a great amount of material in this hour. And I thank you for your patience. The family integrated church movement is a mixed bag at best. I must say that I cannot speak for every person, family or church in favor of this movement. Nor do I want to. But I can offer an overview of the largest and most influential, if not the most defining organization of the movement, the NCFIC.

To the extent that the Center promotes good practices it is a positive influence. But its myopic focus on the supposed intrinsic evils of youth ministries, undermining of Christian liberty with a regulative principle of discipleship, considering FIC churches preferable to confessional churches and its stated purpose to propagate such churches makes it on balance a hindrance at best and harmful at worst.

Christian education and home nurture are important. But then so is church nurture, especially since we believe that covenant children are members of the church and the NCFIC does not.

I do not want to hype up the size of this movement. It is relatively small compared to Federal Vision, for instance, but has more resonance with struggling families than we may realize. It is a more practical issue for many mothers who desire the best for the families.

Remember, it is not enough to demonstrate the gross historical errors of this movement or the incipient legalistic rationales used. You and your church must continue in faithfulness by God's

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<sup>24</sup> "How to Build Your Family Economy One Block at a Time," NCFIC blog, Feb. 20, 2013.

Spirit. And continue to offer a truly biblical alternative with the historic doctrines and practices of the Reformed churches.

There is a real problem that this movement has identified. Families are hurting. And many churches are not helping. Yet a true integration—even revival—of the church and family cannot exist without the fundamentals of the Gospel as much as the family integrated church movement may try otherwise.

It is my hope and prayer that struggling families will find good Reformed churches. Churches of the type our forefathers rejoiced over such as those described in the 1810 report of the General Assembly:

“In those parts of the church, without exception, in which vital religion has flourished, in the course of the last year, the fundamental doctrines of the gospel; viz. the total depravity of human nature, the divinity and atonement of Jesus Christ, justification by his imputed righteousness, the sovereignty and freeness of divine grace, and the special influences of the Holy Spirit in the regeneration and sanctification of sinners have been decidedly received and honoured.”

May the Lord bless his people with the true Gospel that alone can integrate families and churches.