

The High Calling to Shepherd Small Souls

In the past few weeks, I've been struck by the amazing blessing God has given us – and also by the massive responsibility that blessing entails.

The blessing in question is the one that fidgets and snuffles and wiggles and, in time, learns to sit pleasantly in our pews: *children*.

I recently had opportunity to bring greetings from classis at the meeting of a classis in another federation. In the course of that meeting, I learned that their entire classis had seen one baptism in the previous year. One baptism in nine churches! One child brought into the Covenant community!

We witnessed eight in that same period. Truly, we have been blessed!

But blessings often bring work. We see it in the extra help needed in the nursery. We soon will see it in the help our Sunday School teachers will need. We *certainly* will see it at home.

There's no question: children are a blessing that require a lot of work.

The Bible speaks frequently about the calling of parents in bringing up their children. It's a calling quite similar to that which is given to elders and ministers.

Elders and ministers are called to teach sound doctrine to God's people (Titus 1:9), both by their teaching and by their example (1 Timothy 4:11-16). Likewise, parents are called to impart God's Word to the heart of their children, both by formal instruction and by day-to-day living (Deut. 6:6-7; 11:18-21).

Elders and ministers are called to carefully train God's people, maturing them to know, serve and love the Lord (1 Pet. 5:2-3; Eph. 4:11-15). Parents are called to do the same with the children entrusted to them (Eph. 6:4).

The Lord calls elders to protect His people from enemies both evident and hidden, while urging those people to persevere in submitting to the Lord (Acts 20:28-31). Parents are urged to do likewise with their children, both teaching them about how the Lord has delivered His people and warning them about what happened to those who refused to submit to Him (Psalm 78).

Elders and ministers are to discipline those who persist in sin (1 Cor. 5:11-13), while gently restoring those who repent (Gal. 6:1-2). Parents are to practice a similar form of discipline with their children – imparting discipline both by words and by “the rod” (Prov. 23:13-14; 29:15), and expecting the well-disciplined child to give peace and bring delight to his parents (Prov. 29:17).

On the other side of the coin, members of the church are to imitate and submit to the leaders whom God has given the church (Heb. 13:7,17) – even as children are to honor and obey the parents God has given to them (Eph. 6:1-3).

The point is: none of that is easy. It's not something we can put on a to-do list, accomplishing it in a day or a week or a month.

Conscientious elders and ministers have no shortage of work to do among God's people. When the children are small, the elders must ensure that they receive the sign and seal of the Covenant and that their parents understand their responsibility to nurture those children. As the children grow, the elders and ministers are called to catechize them, that the children rightly understand the doctrines revealed in Scripture.

Each year, the leaders of our church are called to watch over and evaluate those children, along with all of the adults. They are to be always seeking to ensure that God's people are growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. When one of those people begins to stray, they must call them back – gently at first, but then with increasing urgency.

And at the same time, the elders and ministers must be diligently guarding against evil influences which seek to lead God's people astray.

It's exhausting – a task far too large for mere men to tackle with any success, apart from God's grace and wisdom.

The same can be said of parenting.

We have to teach our children the basic, physical things, of course: how to eat, how to walk, how to get dressed and use the potty and make their beds. Every parent teaches those lessons.

But Christian parents also have a much higher calling.

We're to teach our children to know and love God's Word. We're to explain to them the reality of their sin, the mystery of salvation in Christ, and their obligation to trust Him. We're to teach them about the subtlety of sin and about our need for the Holy Spirit. We must be intentional in teaching them to place a priority on prayer and Bible reading; to be joyful in worship; to be quick to repent; and to pursue radical reconciliation with others.

That's the reality of Christian parenting. That's what it requires.

There are two ways we can respond to that reality.

One option is to become overwhelmed. Seeing how much we *should* be teaching, we'll throw up our hands in defeat – thereby teaching our children that God lacks the power to change and equip us. Neither by the intentional lessons we speak nor by the example that we show will we lead them into godliness. And great will be our heartache in a few decades.

That first option is sinful – and not only because it is likely (humanly speaking) to lead our children to reject the Lord. It's sinful because it assumes that we must do it all *on our own*. And we can't. Nor are we called to.

We *must* choose the second option.

That's the option of confessing how ill-prepared we are to meet the challenge of raising godly children – falling to our knees and seeking God's help. We need to be in constant prayer that God would equip us for the work of raising children who are more godly than their parents. We need to be scouring the Bible, both so we know the Word that we are to teach, and so we can benefit from the instruction God has given for parents. We need to be reading books about raising Christian children. Above all, we need to be learning from one another, as the experienced parents among us share lessons (both positive and negative) with the younger parents.

We have been *abundantly* blessed – given the gift of a new generation of Christians. The noise we hear in our pews is a joyful noise indeed!

Now let's pray that God will equip us to raise those children to know Him, serve Him, submit to Him – and most of all, to love Him with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. Then, having prayed, let's help one another to do just that!