

FEATURES

Our Feature Articles for this issue are two in number. Neither were written specifically as articles for Perspectives. Both, in fact, were recent speeches, prepared for particular audiences on particular occasions. But the topics addressed were most emphatically ones of general interest and of vital concern to all who are involved in one way or another in the work of rearing children of God's covenant.

Have you ever had the feeling that you have at long last "figured out how to rear a child"... and then "something unexpected comes up"? You'll appreciate Rev. Kortering's thoughts on "Developing Christian Character at Home and School." A thought-provoking speech it was, and very well received by Adams' P.T.A. on the fourth of October, 1984. About a year later Rev. Ron Cammenga spoke on a related topic at the convocation exercises for the beginning of the 1985-1986 school year in our Loveland Protestant Reformed School. He reminded his audience on that occasion that "God is glorified in a school not simply in that the curriculum is in harmony with His revealed Word. But God is glorified by a school in which teachers and students alike conduct themselves in a thankful, holy way." The substance of his address, entitled "The Moral Environment of the Christian School," follows that of Rev. Kortering's below.

Developing Christian Character in the Home and School

Rev. Jason Kortering

The subject which we consider in this article is a highly emotional one. There are a number of reasons for this. The first that comes to mind is the fact that it is so overwhelming. Developing Christian character in a child is

staggering. Our children are not robots, not animals, but highly complex individuals, each with his own personality. By the time we think we have figured out how to rear a child, something unexpected comes up. There are so

many facets to their personality. The second thing is closely related. It is also frustrating. Here we have in mind, not the complexity of their nature, but the fact that they are conceived and born in sin. Their natural inclination is not to develop Christian character. So the developing of it must come in the way of subjugating their natural desires and enhancing spiritual values. This involves sweat, tears, and many prayers. Finally, such development of our children is deadly serious. There is an urgency involved in this great task. It comes from two directions, God places upon us the demand that we labor long and hard at this work; the second is that we love our children and we desire nothing more for them than that they develop Christian character.

As we approach this subject, we will not let our emotions get out of hand. Though there may be a temptation to throw up our hands in dismay, though we may also be tempted to find human solutions and invent our secret formula for "child success," yet we know that the responsibility that God gives us for this work includes the assurance of His presence to accomplish it. God gives us direction and we do best

when we as parents and school work at developing Christian character in our children according to the Word of God.

Let's begin by setting forth what the Bible has to say about Christian character. In theological terms, it is the "new man which is in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 4:24-32). This is set forth in contrast to the "old man of the flesh" mentioned in those same verses. Paul sets forth a similar contrast in Galatians chapter 5. There he speaks of the fruits of the flesh (vs. 19-21) and the fruits of the Spirit (vs. 22-26). The Holy Spirit led Paul to develop this in the letter to Timothy, especially chapter 6 where he speaks so loftily of "godliness."

Christian character then involves being right with God in all areas of our life. We can enumerate a few of them.

Most significant of all is that our children have a right understanding of God. This must include a proper blending of the righteousness and love of God. God is the High and Lofty One and perfect in all His ways. He is also, for Jesus' sake, our Father! Christian character acknowledges this "glory of God," and our children reverence Him. They learn to honor His Word, to take it seriously, to heed His commands, to conform their lives according to His will for them. All of this, because they truly

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love God. It is possible to conform outwardly to certain truths and rules; but godliness requires of us spiritual honesty in our hearts. In the secret recesses of our hearts we either love or hate God. How important it is that our children learn to have meaningful fellowship and communion with God in prayer.

Another area of our life is a correct understanding of ourselves. In terms of psychology this comes under the subtitle of self-esteem. We are afraid of that term because of its terrible abuse. Ungodly psychology pushes this self-esteem and denies the truth of our total depravity. Similarly, a man like Schuler, of crystal cathedral, wrote a book calling for a new reformation which does away with man's innate depravity and replaces it with natural self-esteem. This is wrong and a denial of our Reformed heritage. Nevertheless, we must not extol our depravity at the expense of our sanctification in Christ. Our children's Christian character is expressed in a wholesome attitude toward themselves. They are precious in God's sight; God loved them so much that Christ died for them. God has worked in them the mighty response of grace so that they are "new creations" in Christ. They are beautiful in God's sight and precious to Him. This carries over to our accepting ourselves as God has made us.

As Christ taught, we must love our neighbor as we *love ourselves* (Matt. 22:39).

As implied above, Christian character expresses itself in caring for other people. The love bond between parents and child occasions a child to learn respect for authority, care for others in the family, dealing with right and wrong between brothers and sisters. As they grow up they reach out for friends outside the family.

Finally, our children must develop a system of values. What are good things, bad things? What do they want to achieve? How will they use their time and talents? What place will sports have in their life? What is God's will for their lives? Answers to these important questions reflect good Christian character.

As we concern ourselves with the development of such character, we should agree that the potential for such growth is in their spiritual re-birth. Our children do not have any *Christian* character through birth. They are conceived and born in sin. It is in their being born again by the Holy Spirit that they possess the seeds of such a life as Christians which must be developed. This humbles us, for the life which we treasure most, as believing parents, must be given to them from above. God's promises are our encouragement. The

presence of the Holy Spirit reassures us.

We do well, also, to remind ourselves that working at such development should begin immediately upon birth. Dr. Paul Meier in his worthwhile book, *Christian Child-Rearing and Personality Development*, makes this startling statement: "I have emphasized the first six years the most, because 85 percent of the child's eventual personality will be formed by the time he is six years old. After age six, all we can do is try to modify the other 15 percent of his personality development." Before he ever gets to grade school, 85 percent of his personality is formed for life! This would certainly lead us to conclude that the work of the Christian school teacher will be much easier if we as parents work hard the first six years. How important it is that we set forth Biblical values, a right attitude toward God, toward self, toward others, and even toward life itself long before they go to school.

What is it then that we can do as parents to develop this Christian character in our children? We enumerate a few suggestions.

Work hard so that you have a good marriage. Yes, a loving relationship between husband and wife contributes much to Christian development of character in our children. Look at the world for proof of the opposite.

Divorce, common-law marriages, men coming and going in the home when children observe all this, works havoc in their lives. The fast life costs much in the broken lives of children. They become scarred for life and society pays a terrible price.

How different when the marriage is Christian and husband and wife love each other. The whole atmosphere of the home is trust, understanding, caring for one another. When father and mother pray to God and sincerely conform their lives to God's way revealed in the Bible, the children learn to do this. By word and example the tender soul of the child is prepared for a life of service. This includes carefully defining our roles as God wants us to do this. God instructs a husband to be the "head of his wife" (Eph. 5:23), and the wife to honor and obey her husband (Eph. 5:22). The greatest problem that affects child development is that weak fathers do not *exercise* their headship as they should, thus encouraging dominant wives and mothers. May God give us as fathers the ability to be *fathers* by being good *husbands*. A wife needs the strong leadership of a Christian husband. She needs his love and emotional support in order to be a Christian wife and mother. Instead of being a "doting mother" spoiling her children and trying to win their

love because she is afraid of losing her husband's, she will be an example of godliness, an inspiration that conveys to the children that life is difficult, but with God all things are possible and beautiful.

A second thing that is important for spiritual development is to create a spiritual environment in our homes. By this we do not mean that we set aside moments for "religion." This is good and necessary. Sunday is a special day. Prayer time and Bible reading is a special time. How tragic, if we barely finish praying and father or mother lets out a swear word and takes God's name in vain. Perhaps our devotions are cut short because dad has to run off for the ball game. Dinner conversation concentrates on criticizing the teacher or preacher, or anyone else for that matter. A godly environment includes our awareness that actions speak louder than words to our children. We must be god-fearing if we expect our children to be. Look around your house, would you welcome Christ into your home, should He step in at any time? If not, consider making the changes necessary, for He is present every day.

A third consideration is that we give both positive and negative motivation to our children. I'm sure all of us as parents are well aware of the necessity of dis-

cipline. This is true and must be emphasized. Undisciplined children grow up to be evil characters. Are not the examples of Eli's sons given us in the Bible to warn us? Yet, how should we discipline? A small child must be disciplined differently than is a teenager. There are some clues to evaluate our discipline. Does it hurt us more than the child? (If not, we might be guilty of venting our rage on our child — a form of child abuse). Do we discipline our children so that they feel the wrath of God more than our wrath, and they know this because we explain it to them? There is also the positive side — a few words of encouragement might avoid the sorry consequences of sin. Here we fail most often as parents. It is always easier to criticize than to encourage. This is true in parenting as well. Our children often do well and we say nothing. Positive reinforcement is assuring them that when they do well, God approves, and that His approval does not stimulate pride, but rather makes us grateful that God is working through us.

Finally, we must be consistent in dealing with our children. Paul warns fathers, "Provoke not your children to wrath" (Eph. 6:4). We do this when we punish them according to our own moods, sometimes more severely than they deserve, sometimes not

at all when they should be. We do best when we establish God's guideline in all our life and seek to follow that day by day. As our children grow older they must know that guideline and have the consequences carefully explained so that they respect us when we deal with them, they honor us for God's sake.

May these few thoughts encourage you as parents. Whenever we reflect upon our calling to be involved in the rearing of our children, our inner nature revolts. So often, it seems too far out of reach. My reaction is the same. I encourage you to read the book mentioned above. Mrs. Gertrude Hoeksema also has an excellent book, *Peacable Fruit*. Yes, many

of you mothers in particular tell me that it's too idealistic. But the Word of God sets our goals very high. It is good that we are aware of this. We will then not fret at our duty, we will take courage. God is able to use our efforts to accomplish much. We have many faults that we must confess and repent of each day. Our children are rebellious by nature. Yet, our God is faithful. He will bless our efforts to develop Christian character in our children. With that assurance we take up the task as the most honorable on the face of the earth. It is also the most rewarding. Of all our possessions, only our children will go with us into eternity, the Lord willing.

The Moral Environment of the Christian School

Rev. Ron Cammenga

Crime and violence in our nation's schools have become one of the most serious and pressing problems confronting parents, teachers, and communities today. The educational process itself is threatened by a moral environment that at best proves to be a hindrance to education, and at worst is positively detrimental to learning.

In their book *Violence, Values, and Justice in the Schools*, Rodger Bybee and E. Gordan Gee state:

"Crime and violence in schools have gained enough publicity now to be classified as a major concern of the American public. And, violence and disruption in American education is very real; it is directly perceptible at some level to most teachers, administrators, and, of course, students. The extent and intensity of school and classroom disruption — "discipline problems" — are unprecedented in American education and perhaps in the history of