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Equipping Our Children

by Rev. Meindert Joostens

This article is a slightly revised version of the sermon preached on September 9, 1984, by the Rev. M. Joostens, pastor of the First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. It is the practice of many Protestant Reformed pastors to heed the directives of Article 21 of the Church Order by preaching a special sermon about Christian education near the beginning of the school year.

“That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”
II Timothy 3:17

You realize, beloved, that in taking this as my text this morning on the occasion of the beginning of the new school year and catechism season, I am forcing this text beyond the meaning of the immediate context. You realize, of course, that this is the instruction of the apostle Paul to his spiritual son, Timothy. He encourages, he admonishes this young preacher, that he must be thoroughly furnished unto all good works in the specific calling in which the Lord has called

him. That means that Paul admonishes him that he ought to make himself acquainted with the Word of God, which is profitable for doctrine, and for reproof, and for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. This will stand him in good stead in the ministry of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. So, in the first instance this "man of God," of which our text speaks, is Timothy the young preacher, Paul's spiritual son.

But we can certainly depart from that primary emphasis and meaning of our text and we can go beyond it in applying the principles generally. For even though we depart from Paul's words particularly to Timothy, the principle stands. The principle stands because not only Timothy but each and every one of us has a particular calling, a particular job, a particular vocation, a particular endeavor in this life at which we labor, which we have to perform to the glory of the living God. We too, in other words, must be "thoroughly furnished unto all good works" in the particular calling which God has placed before us.

All of us have such a calling and vocation. Sometimes in our midst there is the emphasis that only preachers have a calling. I dislike that emphasis. It is certainly true that a young man has to stand before the calling of serving the kingdom as a minister before the face of God, first of all. But it is true that God does not call every young man to the particular calling in which I find myself. Young men and women ought to see if the Lord calls them to work with the seed of the covenant as a teacher, to instruct our children. But that does not mean that these are the only vocations and the only callings there are. In fact, we know it is true that the Lord calls us to a variety of tasks, to a variety of jobs in the midst of this life and those things are no less a calling of God than is my calling or those who stand in the classroom teaching our children from day to day. When we talk about our obligation to educate our children today, we are not talking simply about the education of ministers-to-be or teachers-to-be, but we are talking about education as it pertains to each and every one of our children.

We must understand how we are to prepare them in regard to the particular calling, in the midst of this life, to which the Lord calls them. Then each of us, whatever his calling may be, labors "thoroughly furnished unto all good works." That is the connection between this text and Christian education as I want to address it this morning.

The connection is very intimate. You may ask me, "What does this particular text and the whole idea of being 'thoroughly furnished unto

all good works' have to do with the education of my children?" It has everything to do with it, beloved. We have to teach our children and prepare them so that they may be "thoroughly furnished unto all good works" to the glory of God no matter where the Lord places them in this pilgrim's journey here below.

That means that we teach them the three "R's," as we call them, and endeavor to provide them with a full curriculum. This must always be in the light of what we read here in the Word of God. That curriculum must be presented from the viewpoint and the perspective of the obligation of God's Covenant. We do not simply throw in a Bible course with the rest of the curriculum, nor do we simply add prayer to the rest of the curriculum and call it Christian education. There is great controversy in the world round about us regarding this. Prayer in the schools or a Bible on the bookshelf does not make for Christian education. Christian education means that the parental obligation of the covenant pervades every subject! The glory of God pervades the whole curriculum. All things are taught with that one end in mind, that the child of God may be educated piously and religiously, "thoroughly furnished unto all good works," with regard to the calling in which the Lord will call him. In other words, the church, this congregation, as the church institute, and the schools that we as parents form and support have the awesome calling and obligation to equip our children in order that they may live to the glory of God in whatever calling they find themselves. Then, you have the principle of our text applied in the broadest sense of the word that each in his particular calling labor to the glory of God. We have the responsibility, therefore, to equip our children to that end.

I want to notice that with you this morning. I want you to understand three things with me. In the first place, Who must equip our children? In the second place, With what must they be equipped? And finally, Unto what end do we equip them?

I. Who must equip our children?

To answer that first question, "Who has the calling and the task to equip our children?" we must ask a fundamental question and that is this, "Who are our children?" That is the question that needs to be answered. Educators in the world spend a lot of time talking about the question, "Who are our children?" Who are the objects of our instruction?

If we and our children are the descendants of apes many millions of

years ago so that we find ourselves but a speck of history in the perpetual evolution of the species, then it stands to reason that we can give our children over to those who best perpetuate that species. Then we can give our children into the hands of the world so they become thoroughly indoctrinated in the selfish humanistic philosophy that stands for the betterment of mankind and for the evolution of the human being. If the end of a man is himself and his own glory, if there is no God and no salvation, then we might as well allow the state to educate our children. They can indeed teach them how to make a name for themselves, how to become famous in this world, and how to establish themselves so that they will be best served themselves. But that is not the case. Our children are Covenant children. When we answer the question, "Who are our children?", then we answer that by saying, "These children of ours are the Lord's heritage." They are in the first instance God's children and secondly, they are my children. God gives them unto me but for a short time. I must be faithful to my covenant obligation in bringing up His children, the seed of His covenant, to the utmost of my ability.

We and our children are not placed in the midst of this world to be found on an ego trip. We are not the most important consideration. There is but one purpose and one calling that pertains to man and that is this: To live to the glory of God in this life and eternally. If we think that our salvation is strictly for our benefit we are sadly mistaken. God gives unto us this heritage and this place in the midst of His covenant for the glory of His Name. He is to be worshipped, He is to be served.

Parents are responsible to give that kind of covenant training. That is the responsibility in God's Covenant. These children are the seed of His covenant. Believers and their children are the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is why I read this morning from Deuteronomy 6. There you have the principle clearly set forth, that *parents* teach their children. Parents must hold before their children in their rising up and in their sitting down, in their work and in their recreation, the wonders and the glories of Jehovah God. And when your children ask of you, "What mean these statutes?", "Why do you live this life-style, Mom and Dad?", "Why do you take those commandments so seriously?", "Why may we not do this, why do we do this?", then you set them down and you say to them, "It is because of Jehovah the God of our salvation, Who alone is to be praised and worshipped. This is His

demand. It is my obligation to teach you, so that you walk in that same heritage." We have to take that calling, that responsibility, very seriously. Understanding that calling and responsibility, we ought to see what the obligation of the church is. And what is the function of the school? The church, beloved, preaches the Gospel. That is her only function. The church is not a social organization. The church does not become involved in all manner of social functions. The church does but one thing, she preaches the Gospel. And that Gospel, you understand, so permeates the congregation and her life that it touches every part and every sphere of life. There is nothing that stands outside of the preaching of the Gospel. The Gospel permeates the whole of our life. To put that another way, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the King of His church, rules in the midst of His people, in the midst of His church, through the preaching of the Word and by His Spirit. That is central. That is fundamental.

And, to the preaching of the Word belongs Christian discipline. I want to emphasize that this morning. To the preaching of the Word belongs Christian discipline. When the elders come to you in your homes to examine your life-style, when they admonish you, (God forbid that this becomes necessary), they do that as an extension of the pulpit, as an extension of the preaching of the Word. It never goes beyond, the preaching never falls short of it. It is the same as the preaching. It is the concrete application of the preaching to your life and walk, especially when you walk in ways that deviate from the Word of God. In this way Christ, by His Word and by His Spirit, rules in our midst.

You understand then that when, according to the obligation of the Covenant as clearly set forth in the Scriptures, you and I come forward and we present our children for baptism, that vow is not empty but a concrete promise. And when you are not faithful to that promise, in neglecting your obligation, shying away from "to the utmost of your ability," then the elders quite naturally, according to their obligation, come to see you. They admonish you from God's Word, and remind you of your promise and obligation.

The preaching of the Word extends also to catechetical instruction. We as Reformed churches hold a very high view with regard to catechetical instruction. That stands opposed to those churches that have been brought up in a different heritage esteeming very highly the Sunday School. The emphasis in our midst is not upon Sunday School,

the emphasis is upon Catechism. Catechism is the preaching of the Word. I have to know that. I have to continually tell myself how serious classroom instruction in catechism is. I want you as children and as young people to know the seriousness of that. It is the same as this pulpit. It is the preaching of the Word. You children notice, that on Sunday mornings before we start the service, we don't ask you to file down into the basement so that you have a children's sermon administered by someone that is not in the office. We don't do that. That is wrong. The Word of God is addressed to the church of our Lord Jesus Christ: to believers and their seed. In that connection, don't ever underestimate what our children understand of the sermon. Quiz them sometime! So preaching extends into the classroom at the catechism class. That is why we have office bearers teaching catechism. There is a great departure from that today in Reformed circles. It is a shame when office bearers will not take upon themselves the responsibility to give catechetical instruction. That belongs to their office. In catechism the preaching of the Word is concretely applied to the needs of our children. That is where they become indoctrinated. That is where we equip them through systematic doctrinal instruction. That is why you children and young people have to learn those things. When you find yourself in "Essentials of Reformed Doctrine," memorize it, know it inside and out. Those things are the tools that you need. They are the equipment that you need in all your life and endeavors. So that whatever winds of doctrine blow, whatever they may be, you will know what is right and what is wrong.

And when we ask you to memorize the Heidelberg Catechism, then you must do that! You must know it, as do the older people who can recite it verbatim, in order that you may be strong in your faith and know how to walk to God's glory.

How can it be then, that some of us don't take catechism very seriously? And how can it be that some parents don't even see to it that their children show up for catechism or that they know their questions? I should not even have to ask them. I should not even have to keep roll. It is really a shame that I have to do these things.

It is within the sphere of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ and under the preaching of the Word, that you have parents under the obligation to train their children in the way of the Lord. That is the promise of Baptism. Parents are responsible, therefore, to teach their children. Now that is to be distinguished from the preaching of the

Word, you understand, in this way. When the church instructs our children in catechism, we are talking about doctrine. I do not make it my business in catechism to instruct children in mathematics, in biology, or whatever. When they bring it up I am glad to talk to them about it. That is no problem. But the emphasis of the church institute is to indoctrinate our children. The rest of the preparation that our children need for a life's calling belongs to you as parents. You have the obligation. That is Deuteronomy 6.

When presently Rev. Bruinsma goes to Jamaica and he teaches his own children, he will fulfill that obligation in the highest sense of the word. He will teach his children.

We have chosen to do this together as parents in joining and forming a society for Christian education. In our society we can hire teachers who stand in our stead, so that we collectively as parents in an association fulfill our covenant obligation. I hope you understand the importance of that. Sometimes the attendance at society meetings does not reflect that. We believe in parental education, that is Scriptural. We do not give our children to someone else to educate. We are responsible. It is our obligation. We hire teachers. And we ought never to forget that parents have the final and ultimate responsibility as to what is taught their children. When we stand before the judgment seat, we are not going to say to God, "but that teacher, he did it." God is going to say, "and you should have made it your business to know what was being taught your child."

From that point of view, we as parents have the obligation to teach our children in good Christian schools. The church takes an interest in this. That is why I may preach about the Christian schools and the elders may emphasize Christian education. At your leisure read Article 21 of the Church Order and there you will find the church's interest in good Christian education for the seed of the Covenant.

II. With what must we equip our children?

The context points us very clearly to the fact that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." Primarily, our children are to be equipped with the Scriptures. You understand, that there is an absolute difference between ourselves and the world. That comes to light in this text. Paul says to Timothy, "you are to be thoroughly furnished unto all good works." That is possible only for

the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world works. We engage in good works. Oh, it may be that from an outward point of view there is absolutely no difference. In fact, it is possible that a man of the world is better qualified for his job and is able to execute that particular job better than you and I are able to do it. The difference is that the man of the world works and you and I are thoroughly furnished unto all good works. The man of the world takes his pride in that job and that is all there is to it. He is a man-pleaser. He is selfish in his work. He does it for the wrong motivation. But when you and I take upon ourselves a calling, whatever it may be, we do that, beloved, not as men-pleasers but as those who stand before the living God, "thoroughly furnished unto all good works." That is our goal, to equip ourselves and our children to that end. So that when we labor, we fulfill that one obligation, to the praise and the glory of God now and evermore. That is a spiritual, ethical difference. And it is that spiritual, ethical difference that concerns us when we talk about equipping our children.

Therefore we begin with the Scriptures. We have to equip our children with the Word of God. That is basic. And the Scripture, let me tell you, is not on a par with the rest of the sciences, or with the rest of the branches of knowledge in which we educate our children. But Scripture stands first and foremost. It is the queen of the sciences. It dictates how we see all other branches of knowledge, "the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord."

That is why we cannot just put a Bible on the shelf in our schools. We cannot just open and close with prayer and call it a Christian school. It is Scripture that dictates in every one of the branches of the curriculum, barring none. Because Scripture, we are told here, is "profitable for doctrine, and for reproof and instruction in righteousness."

Let me say just a few things about that. Do you want to find out what is true and what is right? Do you want to find out about God and about yourself? Scripture alone gives you the answer. It makes little difference to me, and it shouldn't make any difference to you, what man has to say about where we came from, who we are, or where we are going. Scripture speaks regarding all this clearly. Scripture is true, for it is God's Word. It is profitable for instructing us in these doctrines. And Scripture is profitable unto us because it instructs us in righteousness. That means that it instructs us with regard to every aspect of our life so we can be pleasing to God. Scripture dictates how you behave in your relationships, in your job, in your calling, whatever

you may do. It dictates whether you may have this calling or whether you ought to seek another one. It tells you what is righteous, that is, what is right and what is wrong according to God. Scripture does that! And Scripture rebukes. Don't forget that. When you find yourself in pursuit of the wrong goal, Scripture is going to say, "NO." When you become so absorbed in your earthly calling and work that you lose your perspective as far as the glory of God is concerned, then Scripture says, "Wait a minute." It is profitable for rebuke.

You understand then that when we are ready to prepare our children for their life's calling, in teaching them mathematics, biology, geography, history, etc., then the Word of God tells us what is true and what is the lie. The Word of God tells us what is pleasing to God and what is not. The Word of God reproves and rebuffs. The Word of God must shed its light on everything in the curriculum. You cannot teach these things except you look through the spectacles of Scripture. Otherwise, you are in the realm of darkness. The world doesn't understand anything about history, science, etc., because they don't know what happened in the fulness of time. They don't know the power of God in creation. The world doesn't know mathematics (though they may know much about it). Why? Because they don't have the wisdom of God in Christ. It is not science, biology, and archaeology that dictates concerning Scripture, beloved. That is the new Hermeneutics. That is the philosophy that says, "but this is what they believed at that time, don't take those words of the apostle Paul so seriously."

When you listen to the controversies that are going on in Reformed circles today, especially with regard to women in office, do you discern that there are conservatives who say, "No" and liberals who say, "Go right ahead"? How can they say this? What is their basis? Do they have a struggle with the Word of God? They have no struggle, beloved, simply because they view the Word of God as time conditioned. You want to talk about the place of women in the office of the church? The apostle Paul was talking about that many years ago. That is not relevant today. And so it is with regard to the beginning and origin of all things. The apostle Paul and the inspired writers of the Scriptures did not have the benefit of the archaeology and the developments of science and technology that we have today. We can look at those Scriptures and understand what is right and what is wrong, where they are normative and where they are not. It is just the other way around. The Scriptures dictate all the other branches of knowledge. The

Scriptures instruct. The Scriptures reprove. The Scriptures instruct in righteousness!

III. Unto what end do we equip them?

We give to our children, in as much as we are able, a full curriculum. It is our covenant obligation to prepare the seed of the covenant for their calling in the midst of this world. We may be second to none in this world in education. We must see to it that our children develop their talents to the best of their abilities. But more, in whatever sphere, it must always be emphasized that we are to be to God's glory. So if our children are physicians, let them heal to the glory of God. If they are teachers, let them teach to the glory of God. If they are going to dig ditches, let them dig those ditches to the glory of God. That is the emphasis of Christian education, that the man of God may be perfect.

You see, that has nothing to do with perfectionism, nothing at all. It is not our education that makes our children perfect. That is the philosophy of the world. They say that we have to have a good educational system in order to enhance our society. That is for the betterment of this country. You hear that all the time. That is the philosophy of the world. Teachers, preachers, and parents can never go beyond the work of the Spirit of the living God. I can preach and instruct in catechism until I am blue in my face, but, beloved, it is the Spirit Who applies that instruction. It is the Spirit that makes that absolute distinction between whether a man works or is engaged in good works. That proceeds only out of faith to the glory of the living God.

It is not higher education that makes a man go off the deep end. Such a man never knew Jehovah God. We are but means that God has purposed to use to instruct our children in the fear of His Name. That is our obligation. We are not the missionaries of our children. We are not obligated to save our children, beloved. You read that in so many "Christian" books today. That is not our function. We know that God gathers, preserves, and defends His church. What we must know is that He does that in the sphere of the Covenant, by and large. He purposes to use us (and that is our covenant obligation) in instructing our children so He can take His children from among ours. Woe unto us if we fall short of that instruction, because then the Lord cuts us off in our generations.

The child of God must be "thoroughly furnished unto all good

works," that he may be a pilgrim and stranger in this earth looking toward the eternal. Do you understand that? Do you see, it is not what you can give your child as far as the things of the earth are concerned. It is not how much money you can will to your children. It is not how good you have it here below or how well you educate them so that they can make a name and place for themselves. All these things are of the earth, earthy. Those things are not wrong in and of themselves. If the Lord gives us those things, let us be blessed in them. But our function is to teach our children (as pilgrims and strangers) to walk in the midst of this earth, which is nothing but a continual death. We train them in His fear so that they can sit with us in Father's House of many mansions. That is the viewpoint of covenant education.

We have to be mindful of that. Sometimes I wonder how mindful we are of that. You know that is stressed to us at the time of baptism. After our children are baptized, we hear in the prayer of thanksgiving (the last part of that prayer), "which thou hast shown to them and us and live in all righteousness under our only Teacher, King, and High Priest, Jesus Christ, and manfully fight against and overcome sin, the devil, and his whole dominion to the end that they may eternally praise and magnify Thee and Thy son, Jesus Christ, together with the Holy Ghost, the one only true God, Amen."

I say again, the emphasis is not on what we have or give them here below, but that they may eternally magnify the living God. I am afraid that that is where we fall far short. In our example and in our instruction we pay so much attention to the things of this earth and altogether too little attention to the things which remain unto all eternity. Let's teach them about the kingdom of heaven. Let's teach them that in whatever calling God calls them in this life, they must stand in the service of that eternal kingdom. Let's teach them their mathematics, their history, their geography, and their biology, so that they better understand the glory of God. Then they can be the best doctors, the best teachers, the best shop men, and the best mothers because they have their eyes heavenward! Amen.

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