

GOALS OF PROTESTANT REFORMED EDUCATION

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GOALS OF PROTESTANT REFORMED EDUCATION

If Protestant Reformed education is going to be effective, we need to know where we want to go, that is, we need a statement of our goals. Those of us who are teachers have been talking about goals for years, only we usually call them objectives. In fact, we have talked so much about goals that it seems a little bit ridiculous to spend time writing about them. Nevertheless, I think there are indications that we need to review our statement of goals and perhaps refine it a bit so that we understand clearly what they ought to be and which goals are unworthy.

The ultimate goal of all things, of course, is the honor and glory of God. This is a statement that we all agree upon, but one that does not have much content unless we describe more exactly what that means and give it some content by translating it into more specific goals. It is important to keep this ultimate goal in mind always because education becomes so easily a means of promoting the individual or humanity in general. Here too, we let the ideas of the world intrude upon our schools.

The ultimate goal: The “perfect man”

In this world God honors Himself by making a certain kind of person who will honor Him. His people will honor Him in their particular callings, in their homes, in the church where they contribute to the welfare of their fellow saints, and in the world where their lives demonstrate the work of God in them. Church, home, and school each have an appointed part to play in the development of this kind of person. Such a person is, perhaps, best described in Ephesians 4: 13: “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the

Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Although we strive to achieve this goal, its full accomplishment is possible only in the new creation. Our education is for pilgrims who will pass through this world on their way to the heavenly city.

Goal One: The Love of God

The first and most important characteristic of this “perfect” man is that he loves God. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.” Matthew 22: 37. We must be aware that the school cannot implant the love of God in any child—that is the work of the Holy Spirit. The love of God has already been implanted in children of the covenant. The goal of education is to promote and to encourage such love of God in these children.

Notice several things about the love of God as the goal of education. First, pursuit of such a goal excludes personal pride. In this pursuit we will teach the child to suppress his natural tendencies toward self-love, self-promotion, and self-centeredness. Our education practices will not promote any of these, but will promote the Christian virtues that proceed from the love of God.

Second, we observe that the education of the world promotes scientism, secularism, and humanism, all of which have goals that are antithetical to those of Christians. All of these find the goals of education in the glory of man and his abilities, promotion of knowledge for its own sake or for the greater glory of man, or for some concept such as freedom, or self-realization, or unity that is supposed to advance man’s condition in the earth. These goals

permeate the textbooks of the world today. We need to recognize how these goals shape the contents of the textbooks and oppose them in our teaching.

Goal Two: Obedience

The second important goal of Christian education is obedience. Notice that obedience is closely related to the love of God. In fact, Jesus, in Matthew 22: 37, tells us the love of God is also obedience to the first and greatest commandment. Love of God and obedience to His commandments go together inseparably. Obedience to God's commands also requires obedience to parents and all those in authority over us. "What doth God require in the fifth commandment? That I show all honor, love, and fidelity to my father and mother, and all in authority over me, and submit myself to their good instruction and correction, with due obedience; and also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand." Heidelberg Cat. LD 39, Q&A 104.

This is a primary goal of our education: to teach obedience. This is especially true today when the concept of obedience for God's sake is under attack everywhere. We must work hard to teach children to obey not because the law is reasonable—not because obedience will have results satisfying to them or will carry a reward—but simply because this is what God requires. Having true obedience as a primary goal of our education has important implications for discipline as well as for teaching subjects.

Goal Three: Knowledge

The third goal of education and the one which receives the most emphasis is knowledge. Although no one questions knowledge as a

goal of education, there is much disagreement about the nature of that knowledge and its purpose. This is an important matter because our understanding of this goal affects decisions about the curriculum and methods as well as the answer to the question so often posed by students: "Why do we have to learn all this stuff?"

So often when children ask why they have to learn that stuff, we reply, "Because that's the only way you can get a good job when you get out of school." (Note that when we speak of a "good" job, we nearly always mean a job that pays a lot of money. This is a measure of our own vanity.) It is true that our children usually need a job when they get out of school, and a job does indeed require a certain amount of knowledge. This is, however, a very poor answer to a child's question. In the first place, if getting a job is the main reason for gaining knowledge, our children could better attend a vocational school as soon as they have gained the basic skills. Such an answer also minimizes the importance of an education for those girls who will be married soon after graduation and will care for a family at home. Knowledge is important in every aspect of the Christian life—in the home as well as for active participation in the life of the church. We need knowledge in order to live the antithetical life required of the Christian in the world.

Because our goal is "a perfect man," something that the Christian attains only after this life, in the life eternal, we understand that the most important knowledge is the knowledge of God. "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." This knowledge is, first of all, the knowledge of faith and experience, knowing Him as our God. For those who are children of the covenant and who are regenerated by the Spirit of God, the knowledge of God comes from the study of the

Word of God and of the revelation of God through His creation and through his works.

The importance of the knowledge of God and obedience to His commandments is beautifully described in Psalm 78: 4-7, “We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done. For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children; That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments...”

This knowledge is essential for the attainment of the other goals. In order to learn to love God and to obey Him, we must know the law of God. The famous words of Deuteronomy 6 make that very point: “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children...”

We should not make the mistake of believing that the Bible is all we need to know. We need to know the material of many subjects—math, geography, science, language, history, and many others—but we need to learn and understand them in the light of our knowledge of the Bible. In fact, the main business of the Christian school is to teach these subjects in the light of Scripture.

We need to remember also that there are no neutral facts. The public schools would have us believe that they can be neutral in their

teaching, teaching only objective facts. If we do not teach the truth, we are teaching the lie. Teaching about the creation is not the truth unless the fact of the Creator is a part of the lesson. The public schools teach religion as well as we, only their religion is humanism.

Remember also that knowledge is not only the memorization of facts and the ability to recite them, but it is also the understanding of facts, the acceptance of those facts as the truth, and the relating of these facts to all of our knowledge of the revelation of God and their use in our lives as servants of God.

Knowledge, then, is a goal of education, not as an end in itself but as means of promoting the praise of God. We sometimes make the mistake of considering the acquisition of knowledge as an end in itself. So often we see the student who has acquired great knowledge becoming puffed up with pride so that he turns away from the church and seeks further advancement and honors in the world. We teachers ought to evaluate carefully how we promote the acquisition of knowledge and the kind of knowledge that we teach. True knowledge ought to make the learner more humble.

Goal Four: Reverence

A fourth goal of Protestant Reformed education is reverence for God and His works. There must be in our love for God elements of awe, wonder, worship, and fear that I am here calling reverence. Proverbs 1: 7, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,” expresses the relation between these two goals. This reverence is important in order to make the student understand the relationship between God and His creatures. This goal assumes greater importance in the society of today because so many, even among Christians, are trying

to remake God in human terms, making Him a friend only and not our King. The goal of reverence for God also is the strongest justification for teaching appreciation type subjects: literature, music, art, etc.

The pursuit of these goals in our Protestant Reformed schools should make our education different from that of other schools. It should also influence our view of the trends in secular education today. I had a professor who prefaced many of her ideas with the words, “The research shows...” It didn’t seem to bother her that what the research shows this year is different from what the research showed last year and is probably different from what the research will show next year. We need to be very careful of what is being promoted as truth in education today. It is too easy for many teachers to accept whatever is popular in education and to introduce it into the Christian schools.

False Goals in American Education Today

American public education has in recent years reduced the importance of knowledge as a goal of education. Some have said that since a person in the world today needs far more knowledge than the school can possibly provide, the goals of the school ought to be rather the teaching of methods for acquiring knowledge than the knowledge itself. The assumption here is that if the child has mastered the methods for acquiring knowledge, he will acquire the knowledge that he needs. The idea seems to assume that all knowledge is only information and is all equally valuable and equally valid. The fact is that in the Protestant Reformed schools we want our children to gain the true knowledge which is the knowledge of God. They are not going to come by this naturally: they have to be taught. The skills needed to acquire more facts are also a goal of the school, but are a secondary goal.

Some years ago “problem solving” was promoted as the great goal of education. More recently, it has become “critical thinking.” These may be very fine goals, but they are secondary goals and cannot substitute for knowledge. Some of the schools seem to have forgotten that one cannot solve problems or think critically without a large amount of knowledge to work with. Truth does not lie in methods, but in knowledge—of God and of His Word.

It’s interesting that when the public schools go on one of these periodic binges in which they promote a new goal which promises to be the panacea for all educational ills, they are always eventually brought up short by the public, which insists on knowledge. Our children know less than the Russians—or the Japanese. The scores on our SAT tests are declining. Leaders of business and industry complain that those graduating from school don’t know enough. And so the schools are forced back into teaching knowledge with a materialistic, self-serving goal.

Traditionally, knowledge of God and obedience to His commandments as manifestations of the love of God have been, I think, the primary goals of Protestant Reformed schools. This means that our schools have placed much emphasis upon the importance of teaching as a means of acquiring knowledge. The textbooks we have chosen have usually been those that emphasized knowledge over experience, intellectual skills over social skills, artistic skills, or manual skills, the cognitive over the affective. Part of the reason for the preference of knowledge and obedience as educational goals is that we consider them to be goals of a higher order than the other. The other part of the reason is that our schools have followed the belief that the school is an extension of the home and should be responsible for educating

children only in those areas in which the parents are not qualified to teach their children.

In these times when many schools have supplanted the parents almost entirely, it is important that we define clearly the goals of the school and limit them carefully. There has been a tendency in recent years for parents to place more and more responsibility upon the schools, perhaps because the parents have been more interested in other pursuits and have less time that they are able or willing to spend upon teaching their children. In addition, many schools have felt compelled to take more responsibility for the children's education because many homes were neglecting their responsibilities. Finally, many schools have actively added to the work of the school partly because they feel that as professionals, they can do the job better and partly on grounds that the school must teach "the whole child."

There has been a lot of fuzzy thinking in connection with the concept of teaching the whole child. The child, they say, consists of many different aspects: psychological, social, moral, intellectual, physical, etc. One of these aspects cannot be treated without involving all the others. So far, so good. They say that because you cannot separate one of these aspects from the others, we must of necessity teach "the whole child," and this means that the school has to include every one of these aspects in its curriculum. The school has to be concerned with the development of every quality in the child. To supply this supposed need, many new goals were added and units added to achieve those goals: social adaptation, social skills, psychological adjustment, family living, sex education, and many others. The results of this idea were that the schools were overwhelmed with the number of things that had to be taught, they often became bogged

down in teaching trivia, and they lost a clear understanding of their purpose and goals and became unable to do anything well.

The idea of teaching "the whole child" ought rather to be limited to the fact that a teacher, in teaching a particular subject, must be aware of the fact that other qualities of the child may help or hinder learning in particular. A simple example: A child who has a social problem which results in difficulties with his classmates may have difficulty learning his math because of this problem. The teacher, obviously, has to be aware that he is not programming a computer, but is teaching a child with many characteristics that will affect the learning process. The teacher will concern himself with the social problem to the extent that it interferes with the learning of math, but should not be expected to solve social problems of the child any more than he should try to correct physical problems.

Correcting the problems that may interfere with the learning of the students is not so much a matter of implementing a new program in the school as it is a matter of communicating with the parents so they may address the problem. Some problems that affect the education of the children are spiritual problems. We should not be reluctant to apply to the pastors and consistories for help in dealing with spiritual problems.

Some False Goals in "Christian" Education

One goal we reject but is held by many Christian schools is that of converting the students. Such a goal will certainly affect teaching methods. Also, schools which have such a goal often welcome the unconverted. We maintain that our schools are not mission stations, but are designed for covenant children. Conversion is a function of

the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word. We seek, rather, to nurture spiritual growth among the children of the covenant.

We do not believe in a postmillennial return of Christ to rule the earth. We do not, therefore, train our children to “redeem” the world for Christ. We view ourselves and our children as pilgrims and strangers in the earth. We see redemption of the earth only in the new creation. We train our children to seek a better country, that is, a heavenly one. This influences our treatment of all the subjects.

It seems to be important that the school strictly limit its objectives to those areas for which the parents are not qualified or for some other reason are unable to perform. One reason for strict limitation is completely practical: We don’t have the time to teach all things the child needs to be taught. If we try to do everything, we end up doing nothing well. It is also important for the parents to perform as much of the educational function as they can. The scriptural injunctions concerning education are addressed to parents. This doesn’t mean they are required by scripture to do all the education of the children, but it does mean they are first of all responsible for that education, and when they delegate some of that responsibility to the school, they are still responsible to see that the school does it well.

There are some people who seem to believe that the main purpose of having Protestant Reformed schools is to protect children from wicked influences. They expect that their children will associate with Christian children and will thus be more certain to grow up as Christians. It is true that this is one of the purposes of these schools. We want to keep our children from evil companions and the temptations of the world while we are trying to teach them the way of the Lord. One goal of our schools is to shelter the children while

we nurture them until they are strong enough to function as Christians in the world.

Those who believe strongly in the sheltering function of Protestant Reformed education are gravely disappointed when they discover sins in the children attending the school. Their children come home and tell about the bad language and behavior of some of the students, and they become disillusioned with the school and critical of Protestant Reformed education. Even now, after many years of teaching Protestant Reformed students, I am still sometimes shocked at the language some children use and at their propensity for evil. What bothers even more is the fact that they so often show little remorse. “So you caught me this time. I’ll pay the penalty, and I’ll be careful not to be caught again” they seem to be saying.

We need to remember a couple of facts: Sin doesn’t come from outside; it comes from within—from our own hearts. The old idea that we can escape from sin by separating ourselves from the world is just as attractive now as when many people entered monasteries—and just as false. Confessing as we do the doctrine of total depravity, we really shouldn’t be surprised that our children sin. That doesn’t deny the value of separating our children. We can reduce outside influences which will encourage them to sin. We may even be able to develop an atmosphere in which they will be encouraged to do right.

Even though we know our children, like us, are prone to all evil, it does not mean we should be complacent about it or accepting of their sins. Parents and teachers are responsible for teaching them to know what is right, and to try to get them to behave righteously. The children, too, are responsible before God for their actions. Another important goal of Protestant Reformed education is that parents and

teachers together teach the children the same things about sin, repentance, and forgiveness. Where sin is treated as an aberration or a disease or a variation in lifestyle or a consequence of mishandling by others, children will not learn truly about the wonder of salvation.

There is another difficulty of sheltering children of which, I'm afraid, we are not sufficiently aware or concerned. In our schools we create a kind of closed society. When sins appear in such a society, there is a serious danger that they will become accepted. It seems that when a fellow member of the church does it or my friend does it, then it can't really be so bad. I have found it often with a sin like cheating in school. All would agree that cheating is a sin. Nevertheless, when a couple of my friends do it, it can't be so bad. After a while we can find many excuses for cheating and can find others to blame for it. Finally cheating becomes accepted and is really not considered a real sin, or if it is a sin, an understandable and acceptable one. When sin appears in a closed society, there is a serious danger that it will become acceptable and will lose its sinful character.

Conclusion

We often say that one of the goals of Protestant Reformed education is to teach our children to live as Christians in the world. I think this is, perhaps, the goal that summarizes all others.

DISCIPLINE

The Principles of Discipline

One of the most important goals of Protestant Reformed education ought to be the teaching of obedience. Obedience to God and the instruction of His Word is an outstanding characteristic of Christians. Without Christian obedience the other goals of Christian education may be impossible of attainment. I believe, further, that threats to the concept of obedience are some of the greatest threats to our schools today. We try to teach our children obedience through our discipline.

Obedience consists of several elements. It is recognition of the authority of God and of His Word. It is the submission of the child of God to that authority. In submission to that authority he desires to do what God wants him to do. He desires this because he loves God and wants to do those things that will please Him. He finds joy in obedience. Out of his love for God he willingly obeys those whom God has placed in positions of authority over him: parents, teachers, employers, government.

It is essential for the Christian teacher to remember from the beginning that discipline must proceed from love. Although the covenant child is yet a child and in need of discipline, he is also a fellow member of the household of Christ and must be disciplined in love. Because we love the covenant child, we are deeply concerned with his spiritual welfare and therefore feel compelled to direct him to the way of eternal happiness. "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou

shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.”
Proverbs 23: 13.

Encouraged by the world, many Christian parents seem to believe that punishment of the child is evidence of dislike. Children would love to encourage this idea. Many a child has averted punishment by saying, “You don’t like me. That’s why you treat me this way.” This often makes parents and teachers feel guilty because we must confess that very often our discipline does not give evidence of love for the child. We have to work at demonstrating our love through discipline.

I think one of the reasons discipline is breaking down in many schools today, public and private, is that the concept of total depravity is denied. Total depravity is the doctrine that every person is both unable and unwilling to do anything which is right in the sight of God. Only by the operation of the Spirit in the heart of the person is he made both able and willing to live in a way that is right. Even the person who is regenerated needs constantly to fight against sin in his nature and often fails. We therefore expect the children of the covenant to sin, but we expect that, because they are children of the covenant, they can also experience true repentance and will respond to discipline.

Because we believe in total depravity, we do not expect the child to be naturally good. “Expect them to obey and they will” does not work in real life. We also reject the current desire to blame all of the child’s difficulties upon some “disease.” Be aware, of course, that there are very real “diseases” which can cause a child to be difficult to control or to be apparently disobedient. We always have to be alert to the possibility that a child’s problems have an organic cause. Nevertheless, only those who assume that children are born good will

explain unacceptable behavior as the result of disease. It makes us feel good to call sin a disease and to put a scientific label on it because then we can treat it with pills and medicines and therapy, and we don’t have to deal with it as sin, which is much more difficult and requires confession and repentance.

Further, if we believe in total depravity, we will not look for the root causes of misbehavior in defective environment or improper nurturing by the parents, but will realize that these may be factors which, under the providence of God, promote sinful behavior; nevertheless, each person is responsible before God for his own actions. The ultimate cause of sinful behavior of the child is his own depraved nature.

I am frequently astonished and disturbed that the teachers fail to receive total support from the parents in the discipline of their children. This seems surprising because our goal is, or ought to be, the same: training the child in the way of obedience. We often hear that parents are saying, “The teachers ought to show more compassion.” “Teachers don’t understand my child.” When I explore these complaints, I seem to find that many parents really mean, “If my child did wrong, it must be the fault of something or someone else.” “Teachers really shouldn’t punish my child.”

There seem to be problems between parents and teachers of divergent ideas of discipline. Some parents seem to believe in the natural goodness of their children and allow their children to rule in the home. Some parents seem to believe that they can gain their child’s love by giving him what he wants and acceding to his demands. They believe that their child will then love them and will obey them. Nothing could be more mistaken. Most often children from

permissive homes will be demanding, self-willed, self-centered, and unhappy. Further, if the parents have not established their own authority, it is difficult for the teacher to establish his authority. But teachers also may fail to establish their authority and allow the children too much “freedom.” A child who comes from a well-disciplined home will be confused and unhappy in a permissive environment. Other teachers may rule too harshly and arbitrarily, failing to demonstrate love through discipline. The key here is cooperative effort: home and school supporting each other toward the same goal.

The goal of discipline is to teach the child obedience, that is, true obedience which comes from the heart of the child out of love for God and a desire to obey His commandments. Beginning with the fifth commandment, children are instructed repeatedly to obey their parents and, by extension, all those who are in authority over them. Children must obey those in authority over them because they love God and because God has placed these authorities over them. It is of critical importance that we teach our children this Biblical principle of obedience.

Children must be taught to obey for the simple reason that God says so. Ephesians 6: 1 says: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” Notice that God here does not tell children that this is necessary to retain order in society or that this is reasonable and sensible, but only that it is right. There are many parents today who say, “My child doesn’t obey because he doesn’t understand the reasons for the rules. The teacher has to explain why he makes these rules.” Now it is true that any person will obey a rule more readily and more easily if he understands why the rule was made and what result was intended when the rule was made, but the child does not

obey the rule for that reason. He obeys it because God commands him to obey those in authority over him.

Nevertheless, we must never forget that we must obey God’s laws even though we may not understand why God made them. Remember that if we have the right to know the reason for each law which God has made, then we also have the right to judge whether that law is a good one and appropriate for us to obey. In the world today people are constantly subjecting God’s law to the test of human reason. Of course, they then decide that God’s law is not appropriate for them or for this time or feel they have the right to modify God’s law to suit their own idea of what is appropriate. Our children do not have the right to question why a rule was made. They must be taught that they are to obey not because they understand the reason for the law, but because they recognize that in obeying the law made by one in authority, they are obeying God.

On the other hand, children must also be taught that laws are necessary in this evil world and that they are made for very good reasons. Laws are needed to protect people from the wickedness of others and prevent them from carrying out their own evil impulses as well as to bring order to society. God’s laws are not arbitrary. The laws of men, however, are not always good because men are totally depraved. But the child needs to understand also that he must obey even those laws which he believes to be arbitrary or even sinful.

Here again, we are teaching a principle contrary to that which is popularly accepted in our culture. We and our children constantly hear the idea that if you consider a law to be a bad one, you don’t have to obey it—civil disobedience is promoted. We need to teach

our children that they must disobey and may disobey only those laws which to obey would cause us to sin.

Exercise of Discipline

It seems that today there are increasing objections to physical punishment of children. It seems that any kind of physical punishment is considered to be abuse. It's interesting to notice that Scripture does not reject physical punishment but encourages it. "He that spareth the rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes." Proverbs 22: 15 "Withhold not correction from a child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell." Proverbs 23: 13 & 14 "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame." Proverbs 29: 15

As with any form of punishment, physical punishment must be used judiciously and its goal must be correction. It must not risk injury to the child, nor must it be done impulsively or in sudden anger. It should be reserved for serious offenses or repeated offenses and should be done only after the child is made thoroughly aware of the reason for the punishment.

We ought to be aware that there is far more injury done to children in ways other than physical punishment. Many of those who reject physical punishment instead use ridicule, mockery, browbeating, denigration, vilification, insult, belittling, rejection and other devices which may be far more harmful to the child than a spanking. When the right of physical punishment is denied the teacher, he often feels forced to use one or more of these methods of control which can have far more devastating effects than an application of the paddle.

Physical punishment is permitted under the rules in most Protestant Reformed schools. There are carefully prescribed rules for its use: it must not be done in anger; it must not be done on a part of the body which may sustain serious injury; it must be done only in the presence of a witness; it may be done only after contacting a parent of the child. The existence of these rules tends to deter the use of physical punishment in the schools: it's just too much hassle.

The requirement to contact a parent before using physical punishment is an interesting one. If the purpose of contacting the parent is simply that he be informed of the punishment, why is it not better done after the punishment is administered, and why is the parent not informed every time his child is punished? If the purpose is to gain permission from the parent, what if the parent refuses permission? Should some children be punished physically because their parents allow it and others not because their parents forbid it? Then discipline cannot be consistent. Also, we violate the rule that individual parents do not make the rules for the school, but rules are made by the board chosen by the parents and representing them.

Another important thing a child has to learn is that discipline is the result of love. A child believes that if you love him, you will not punish him. I doubt many children can understand that punishment proceeds from love. It's important that we try to make him understand this anyway. Perhaps the best thing to do is to tell the child why punishment is necessary and then after he has been punished, to leave the incident behind, not referring to it again but demonstrating interest, concern, and love for the child.

The immediate purpose of discipline is, of course, to modify the behavior of the child. We need to remember, though, that we are at

the same time affecting his behavior in the future for either good or bad. If he has gained something from his misbehavior, he will be likely to repeat it. The way he has been treated will also affect his attitude toward this kind of behavior as well as his attitude toward the teacher, toward his work, and toward the school. If the child finds that his misbehavior has gained him the recognition of his peers; if he finds that the penalty also gains him recognition; if he believes that the teacher can be manipulated or that the teacher is “soft,” allowing him to escape the consequences of his actions, then you can be sure he will misbehave again.

Our long-range goal is that the child be obedient by his own choice, and that he be obedient whether an authority is present or not. Also, we work for an obedience which comes from the heart of the child, proceeding from love for God.

The Scriptural injunction applies to teachers as well as fathers: “provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.” Colossians 3: 21 We must be careful not to punish the child for things he cannot change, or to give him the impression that he is being punished for things beyond his control. For example, we may punish a child because he has failed to do his math problems at home. If he was unable to do them and was unable to obtain help, the punishment may be discouraging to him. Punishment for failure to complete his work must also make clear to the student that the punishment is for lack of diligence, not for lack of ability.

It is vital to remember that the child is learning from us about God. To the child, the parent and the teacher stand in the place of God. We promote this idea when we teach that our authority comes from God. But we need to be aware that this makes our methods of discipline of

enormous importance. From our exercise of discipline the child will learn about justice and about repentance and about forgiveness. In simple terms, we must treat the child in the way that God treats us so that in our actions the child will learn about God. We must not ignore, excuse, or explain away sin, but as we have learned, so must our children learn: the way to deal with sin is through recognition, confession, and repentance.

A couple of observations may be appropriate.

Because he has been placed in this position of authority, the teacher must exercise his authority. He must not try to make himself friends with his students by acting like them or giving them the authority which belongs to him. He may let his students make some decisions, and he may follow decisions that they have made, but only within the limits the teacher himself has set. The teacher must not abdicate; the students are going to learn the concept of authority from him.

The teacher must not overdo leading the children through confession and repentance. We do not stop to confess every sin which we commit; if we did, we would have time for little else. If we do this too often with the child, it loses its effect. The child who has learned well needs only an occasional reminder.

In this lies a real danger: we are not gods, and if we begin to think that we are, we become arrogant, arbitrary, and unjust. We have to be careful to remember that we ourselves are servants and only reflect in weakness the work of God. As soon as the child is old enough to understand, we need to make clear that we are only servants of God and are subject to all the sins and weaknesses of

people. Teachers: It doesn't hurt to admit to a child that you have made a mistake.

I'm not sure whether children are different today from what they were years ago or whether I am gaining a different insight into children's behavior as I become older (read "more experienced," please), but it appears to me that the behavior of children today is primarily influenced by their interaction with their peers. Much of children's behavior today appears to be motivated solely by their desire to gain recognition or respect or even simple attention from their peers. The clothes they wear, the slogans or pictures on their shirts, the brand of their shoes, the words they use, their manner of walking, and above all, the way they act—all are dictated by their classmates.

The dictatorship of their peers seems to be more tight than ever before. Of course, in the past the possibility of rigid conformity to one's peers was limited by the lesser funds available from parents and the lack of understanding by the parents that "everybody does it" is an argument that supersedes all others. Today's children have finally succeeded in teaching their parents how important that is.

A parent, when hearing of his child's behavior at school, will often say, "Why, he never behaves like that. I can't understand it." It's hard for parents to realize that their child's behavior at school is likely to be far different from his behavior at home because at school his behavior is so heavily influenced by his peers. Both parents and teachers should be aware of this when they are discussing the child's behavior.

Because so much of the child's activity is related to his relationship to his peers, it is important that this fact be considered when the teacher

corrects a student. Any treatment that will cause the child to "lose face" before his fellows must be used with extreme caution. The teacher often has to make a judgment about the potential response of this particular child. This is not to say that a teacher should never correct a child before his classmates. A courteous request to cease and desist is appropriate at almost any time. Most often if you have not had occasion to correct the child before, you are better off speaking to him about his behavior in private. Even on other occasions you can usually deal with a child more effectively in private because then he is playing to an audience of only one and that one is not his peer. By dealing with him privately you can also judge better his response to your admonition and adjust your treatment of him accordingly.

In the event that the misbehavior is deliberate, public, and serious, the teacher should make sure the class recognizes that the teacher feels this is serious misconduct and it requires special treatment. Isolating the student from others by putting him in a special place or sending him out of the room takes away his opportunity to continue the misconduct and symbolically demonstrates that sin must be isolated from the community of believers.

On certain, special occasions students should also be taught some of the principles of Christian dealing with public sins. On those occasions when a student has sinned against another by deliberately causing physical injury or has seriously hurt another's feelings by insult or humiliation, I think a public correction and a public apology by the offender may be a valuable lesson to both the student and the class. Beware, though: students are expert at speaking words with an expression that belies their meaning.

Another thing which concerns me about many of the children today is that they seem extremely self-centered. Perhaps this is due to the fact that in many homes the children are the center of attention. By saying they are self-centered, I mean these children seem to judge their own actions and those of others on the basis of their effects upon themselves. "What can I do to gain the attention of others? Will I gain or lose friends if I answer the question in a certain way? This is good because I want it. I am the center of my own universe." Children are by nature proud just as we all are. Discipline requires training in humility. Christian submission to God requires humility.

Some Practical Observations

Perhaps a few things ought to be said about the use of Scripture in discipline. Scripture should not ordinarily be used as a device for punishment, such as copying or memorizing sections from the Bible. This will affect in an improper way the child's attitude toward and his evaluation of the Bible. The teacher should also be careful not to use the Bible as a club, giving perhaps the impression that Scripture speaks through the teacher to the student. The child may get the impression that the Bible is the teacher's tool to chastise him.

The Bible may properly be used in discipline to show the child that what he has done is an offense, not only to others, but—more important—an offense to God. The teacher may use the Bible to point out the way of repentance. But the teacher must be sure to show also the mercy of God in forgiveness, so that the child does not think of God as only a God of retribution.

I find many children who seem to feel that a simple, "I'm sorry" is enough to end all problems. A person may say he's sorry and mean it

sincerely, but that may not be the end of the matter. There may be a penalty anyway to impress upon his mind the seriousness of his offense and the need to avoid such behavior in the future. As far as possible the child must learn that he is also responsible for trying to repair the damage which has been done.

Teachers should be extremely careful about the use of prayer in discipline. Remember that when you pray, you are speaking to God. Do not use prayer as a device to admonish children. Nor should the teacher act in prayer as a kind of prosecutor who will convict the students in the eyes of God. Prayer should never be used as a weapon for the teacher to use to gain advantage over the students. In this also the teacher is teaching about God and about prayer. The teacher must go to the throne with the students to make supplication for them and with them, but also to plead for himself.

Prayer may impress the students of the seriousness of sins that they have taken lightly, such as minced oaths and even curses which have lost their gravity through frequent use. Prayer may impress the students with the wickedness they often display in their treatment of others. Prayer may be the means which the teacher uses with individuals or a whole class to put sins behind them and begin anew after confession and repentance. Prayer is too important for a teacher to use lightly and too powerful for the teacher to use carelessly.

When calves are put into a new pasture, one of the first things they like to do is check out the fences all around the pasture. If a gate is left open or a part of the fence is down, they will find it and will immediately escape from the pasture. On each subsequent day they will make a similar tour, checking the fences. Once they find that the

gates are closed and the fences are in the same places and in good repair each day, they will stop making tours of the fences and will stay contentedly in the pasture. Children are much like that. They will test the rules again and again to see whether they are the same and whether the same behavior will trigger the same response each time. Once they find that the gates are always closed and the fences are in the same places and kept in constant repair, children, too, will settle down and stop continuous testing.

An important feature of discipline, then, is that it be consistent. If the child does not know which behavior is going to be punished on a particular day, he is going to be uncomfortable and unpredictable. If the rules change frequently, the children will feel compelled to test them frequently. The rules must be consistent from student to student. You can't punish one person for behavior that another student does without punishment.

Teachers, especially less experienced ones, have to beware of the many ingenious devices which children use to avoid penalties for their wrongdoings. The universal favorite, "Everybody was doing it," is still remarkably effective. The old favorite response, "That doesn't make it right," isn't very convincing to a student. He wants to make you feel guilty as though you could have punished many others who were at least as guilty as he, but you chose to punish him only.

"That's not fair" is a response which often works well to ease or avoid a punishment. It's effective because it is exceedingly important that the teacher be fair, and every teacher strives to be as fair as possible. The problem is that the student's notion of what is fair and that of the teacher are often different. The teacher often takes into account the student's behavior in the past, the attitude of the student, the

problems which resulted from the offense, and other considerations which other students cannot evaluate.

"The teacher just doesn't like me" is a very common excuse probably because it plays well at home. Like "He's not fair," it's easy for the student to find examples that seem to prove his argument. The children know it is guaranteed to cause great concern of the parents. It's also an argument that strikes the vulnerability of teachers. Students have an instinct for the jugular and this is it. It's impossible for the teacher to prove it false. Every teacher is most sensitive to such a charge because teachers are expected to like their students and to keep any feelings of dislike they may have rigorously suppressed. It attacks his very quality as a teacher. Further, such a charge is quickly picked up by other students. There is a certain macho aura to the student who can claim that he has gained the dislike of the teacher. And every teenage girl is half convinced that all adults are against her anyway.

It is extremely important that the teacher show repeatedly an interest and a liking for his students. The desire to be recognized as an individual is so great that I have often known students to be extremely disobedient with the certainty of severe punishment for no other reason than the teacher recognize him. Teachers can avoid many discipline problems just by showing an interest in each individual student. Try to become familiar with his circumstances, his interests, or his family and ask about them. An encouraging note on his paper, a friendly word, a compliment—these may prevent all sorts of trouble for a teacher. A student finds it more difficult to offend a person who has shown an interest in him.

Don't overreact. If you become extremely angry over something that the students did not consider very serious, you tend to confuse them and bring on more trouble. The students' misbehavior is not usually directed at the teacher personally. It is most commonly intended to impress another student. If the teacher mistakenly takes this as a personal attack upon himself and reacts violently, the students are most likely to become sullen and may well try to arouse the anger of the teacher. Deal with misbehavior as calmly as possible, and do not allow admonition or correction to consume very much class time.

There are times, though, when anger is appropriate. Those actions that are serious sins—cursing, cruelty to others, flagrant disobedience—are proper objects of anger. "Be ye angry and sin not" means that we should not permit our anger to provoke us to sin, but should control our anger and should make clear that the sin is serious. I have found it effective, sometimes, without displaying outward signs of anger to say to the students, "I am extremely angry over your behavior, and I think that I ought to be angry." Then I explain why I consider their offense a serious one.

Suppress the urge to preach at the students. This is not to say that you should not point out what Scripture has to say about the behavior of the students, but this should be done when the students are really not aware that their behavior is sinful or have forgotten that sins are serious offenses to God. Most commonly the students know perfectly well that their behavior is sinful. They don't need to be persuaded of that. The longer you dwell upon their sins, the less they will listen and the less effective your admonition will be. I have known students who enjoyed sermons because they didn't have to listen and didn't have to do their work while the talk was going on. Assignments were then

delayed until the following day. Now, that is truly "counter-productive."

As teachers, it is our job to be in control of our classrooms. We must insist upon immediate and cheerful obedience. There is an old recommendation for new teachers, "Don't smile until Christmas." Although a bit of an exaggeration, the point is that it is necessary first to establish your authority in your classroom, and then you can begin to become more relaxed with the students. Remember that Christian students are comfortable only when rules are clear and are enforced firmly and consistently.

There are a few common traps that teachers should avoid. Never make threats that you cannot or do not intend to carry out. You can lose your credibility in no time at all if you say something and fail to do it. Do not make excessively extensive punishments. Staying in a large number of recesses or assigning an enormous number of lines will make the punishment lose its effect because it is spread over too long a time or it seems impossible of completion and then becomes only a joke. When the punishment is completed, it should be understood that the student is restored to favor and his misdeeds will not be brought up again as long as he continues to behave. The child will learn best when the teacher makes as sure as he can that the child recognizes the justice of the teacher. Thus justice may then be tempered with mercy.

Many teachers have gotten themselves into impossible positions through the use of mass punishments. Often it happens something like this: Some student in the class has done something very wrong, such as writing graffiti on the washroom wall, and the teacher is sure that others in the class know who is guilty. The teacher is certain that

someone in his class is responsible. He tells the class that they will lose all recesses until the guilty person confesses or until others in the class report the guilty person to the teacher or persuade him to confess. Although it's not wrong for a teacher to impose such a punishment, it is usually most unwise to do it. You can keep the students in only so long and you will have to cancel the punishment. The private code of students that says a student does not report the misdeeds of another no matter how serious will probably prevail in this situation. The students will, in such circumstances, feel required to band together against the teacher. You need to consider all the possible outcomes before you impose such a punishment.

Group punishment may sometimes be appropriate, however. I think that it can be used in the appropriate situation as a way to teach corporate responsibility. If, for example, I have to be out of the classroom for some good reason and a number of students misbehave, it is usually impossible to determine exactly which of the students were responsible. I may, then, keep the whole class in during recess and explain to them that people are responsible for the misdeeds of others when they are aware of them and make no attempt to discourage them. It is an important lesson: We are our brother's keeper. We may hope that this lesson will carry over to the playground where students frequently use the worst kind of language, and no fellow student even attempts to discourage them.

Discipline is important in the classroom, not just as a means for the teacher to preserve his sanity or to make education more efficient, but as a means to teach the children important spiritual concepts. The means and the methods which the teacher uses must be directed to training the child in the way of obedience to God. The teacher must not try to be a buddy to his students. If he does that, he is

misusing his position. The teacher holds a position of authority, and he must demonstrate the proper use of authority. For that student, the teacher stands in the place of God, and the teacher is called to demonstrate to the students how God deals with us in justice and mercy and love.

Remember that as a teacher in a Protestant Reformed Christian school, you are not alone in training the child in the way of obedience. There are many wonderful parents who send their children to the school because they want them instructed in the way of obedience. They are eager to support you in matters of discipline. Just remember that your approach to them is important, too. If you approach the parents with the assurance that you love their child, that you are concerned about his welfare, and that you want their help in solving the problem or their suggestions about how to solve the problem, you will have the total support of the vast majority of them. If you can assure the parents that you are not blaming them or accusing them or demanding that they "make the kid shape up," they will be your best source of help. Both parents and teachers need to recognize that they are engaged in a cooperative effort to gain a common goal.

Be sure to emphasize in your contact with the parent that you are engaged in a cooperative effort. When you criticize their child, many parents will feel that you are criticizing them and their ability to discipline their child. Parents will then become defensive, and we will have great difficulty getting them to adopt the proper attitude toward their child's behavior. A good way to begin a discussion of their child is to say something like, "I'm concerned about the way your child is behaving." Then go on, if necessary, to show how the behavior is inappropriate and how the child will cause problems for himself and others if such behavior continues. If your attitude is one of concern

rather than condemnation, you will be far more likely to enlist the support of the parents. “I need your help” is far more effective than “This is what you ought to do.”

Teaching obedience is a difficult challenge in these times when the concept of obedience is lost in a world obsessed with “rights” and “freedom.” It is regrettable that many Christian homes are becoming dominated by children who have not yet learned what the Scripture means by obedience. In teaching obedience you are not only making your own work easier and more pleasant, but you are also teaching the children by word and example an important spiritual concept.

Pray for His help in these lawless times.

SELF-ESTEEM: THE PROBLEM, NOT THE SOLUTION

Johnny doesn't do his work well at school. He seems to be able to do it, but he won't do it carefully and often he doesn't get it done at all. Connie doesn't get along well with the other girls. She's always fighting with them. Ozzie is in high school, but he was suspended because he was wielding a knife in school. He and his friends have repeatedly been in trouble for drinking and are reported to be users of drugs.

The schools and the homes are full of problem children these days. Yet if you would listen to many experts, teachers, and parents, you will find them agreed that the cause is the same for each child: low self-esteem. These children have suffered from low self-esteem from birth or have acquired low self-esteem from the way that others treated them, especially their parents. If we could just help our children to feel good about themselves, they would improve their performance in school, be willing to treat others well, and would not become involved in crime or with substance abuse.

Many Christian parents and teachers have accepted the idea that low self-esteem lies at the root of many of the problems of children in homes, schools, and society. Their training of their children concentrates upon helping the child “feel good about himself.” This requires that the parents treat their children with repeated and concentrated doses of praise. Criticism and correction are to be administered as little as possible for fear of lowering their self-esteem. Some parents feel obligated to give the child what he wants and to allow him to do what he wants because they feel that his self-esteem will be promoted in this way. Their children must be the best dressed, must be involved in every social activity, if possible must be

superior in sports, must excel in every way possible or at least in one way so that they will not have negative thoughts about themselves.

Christian schools, also, have often adopted self-esteem as one of their important goals. This has been happening partly as a result of pressure from parents and partly as a result of teacher training problems. It has required some modification of the curriculum and of grading systems so that every child will experience success. The methods of discipline have to be revised so that children are given more praise and less correction. Activities are introduced that are designed to promote self-esteem in each child. Teachers must be more accepting of “personal differences” in behavior. If all these things are done, every child will learn as well as he is able, discipline problems will disappear or be reduced to a minimum, and children will grow up as confident, happy citizens who like themselves so well that they do not misuse drugs or commit crimes, but contribute to others for the welfare of society.

I hope that if you are a Christian, the last two paragraphs have struck you as unscriptural nonsense. Even one who is not a Christian can recognize that there is no scientific research that proves in any way that low self-esteem and low achievement, crime, and substance abuse have a cause and effect relationship. The Christian will certainly recognize that the ideas here are opposed to the teachings of Scripture.

There are three ways that people have developed to avoid the unpleasantness of feeling guilty. One of them is to change the definitions so that actions that used to be called sin are not sin any more. Using this method, killing unborn babies has become “exercising one’s freedom to control her own body.” Various sexual

sins have become “alternative lifestyles.” You change the definition and abracadabra, it’s not sin anymore. Those actions that are still not approved by society are called diseases. This is a very effective method because one doesn’t have to feel guilty about a disease. After all, you can’t help it if you have a disease. And besides, calling it a disease suggests that it might be cured by some sort of medicine or therapy. Finally, for those kinds of behavior that can’t be redefined or labeled as diseases, they are blamed upon some outside influence, and the person who does the undesirable things is a “victim.” Sin has been removed, and no one has to feel guilty.

Please understand that I am perfectly aware that there can be organic causes for undesirable behavior. Brain tumors can cause aberrant behavior. Dyslexia makes it difficult for a person to learn to read. Other malfunctions of certain parts of the body can lead to actions that we call bad behavior. There are also certain kinds of behavior, from whatever cause, that can best be controlled with drugs. These are relatively unusual, but they do exist and we must be aware of them.

Nevertheless, what’s happening is that parents who are having any sort of trouble with their children are looking for organic or environmental causes and therefore expect environmental cures or perhaps a dose of an appropriate medicine. The old heresy of the natural goodness of man has caused more problems in childrearing and child training than any other heresy. Parents are made to feel guilty for not allowing their children more freedom and for not promoting the child’s self-esteem when in fact they permitted too much freedom and did not deal with the child as a person born in sin. It may even be true that the parents are not at fault at all for whatever problems the child has.

The first thing we need to do is consider what the Bible says about us. “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” Psalm 51: 5 “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags...” Isaiah 64: 6 “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” Jeremiah 17: 9 These texts and others clearly show that God wants us to understand that we are born in sin and are utterly depraved. The Heidelberg Catechism says it most clearly in Lord’s Day 3, Q & A 8: “Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness? Indeed we are; except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.” This doctrine is critical to our understanding of our children and our training of them.

The covenant child, like all others, is born in sin. Nor does his regeneration remove his irresistible compulsion to sin. “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” Galatians 5: 17 “For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do....O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” Romans 7: 19 & 24 This is where we have to start when we try to raise our children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Ephesians 6: 4

It is clear that the Scripture does not want us to “feel good about ourselves,” in fact, quite the reverse. The Heidelberg Catechism, expressing the thought of Scripture, tells me that the first thing for me to know so that I may “live and die happily” is “how great my sins and miseries are.” Lord’s Day 1, Q & A 2. The Bible tells me to feel very bad about myself so that I may see that my only hope is in Him and that He may receive all honor and esteem.

Nowhere does the Bible encourage us to think more highly of ourselves; rather, we are constantly warned against the sin of pride and are constantly admonished to cultivate the spirit of meekness. It would seem to me that it is quite contradictory to promote both self-esteem and the spirit of meekness. Yet by demonstrating meekness, we are to imitate Christ. “Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart...” Matthew 11: 29 Jesus tells us that the meek are among those that are the blessed ones. “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.” Matthew 5: 5 Jesus describes our attitude toward God most powerfully in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, for when the publican prays, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” Jesus makes this comment, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” In fact, humility on earth is the key to greatness in the kingdom of heaven. “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 18: 4

Notice the spiritual virtues that God calls us to promote in our lives: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.” Galatians 5: 22-23 “But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.” I Timothy 6: 11 It would appear that self-esteem is not one of these spiritual virtues, but that spiritual virtues are opposite to self-esteem.

Would not self-esteem defeat our calling to “esteem other better than themselves”? We are commanded to promote others by submerging ourselves. “But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest

among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is thief, as he that doth serve.” Luke 22: 26 “Likewise, you younger, submit yourselves unto the elder, Yea, all of you be subjective one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.” I Peter 5: 5

Should we not rather teach our children that discipleship of Christ is self-denying, not self-esteeming? “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.” Matthew 16: 24-25 The Apostle Paul has some of the same idea in mind when he says, “Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord...” Philippians 3: 8

If we take an honest look at ourselves and our children, do we not find that we and they have too much rather than too little self-esteem? In our country self-promotion is a way of life, so much so that we don't even notice it anymore. Consider the politicians selling themselves and the sports figures taking personal glory in their skills. Children especially imitate those who glory in themselves. We and our children are too much concerned about ourselves, our possessions, our social position, the degree that others recognize us. Our children are already terribly self-centered, and we want to raise their self-esteem? The really serious danger today is not too little self-esteem, but too much pride. Pride has always been the great sin of many since the fall of Adam and Eve, but we don't recognize it as a threat anymore. We have been made to think of it as a virtue.

The movement to blame low self-esteem for the problems of children and young people has been going on for a number of years already.

In 1987 the California legislature appointed the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility because they felt social problems such as substance abuse, crime, and suicide were the results of low self-esteem. I'm not sure whether or not they have been able to raise the level of self-esteem in the young people of California, but I'm sure that the degree of their social problems has not declined in spite of their efforts.

Christians ought to recognize the self-esteem movement as part of the pattern that was predicted by the Apostle Paul in II Timothy 3: 1-2 & 5, “This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy. . . Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.”

It is a fact, though, that there are many children as well as adults who do not function well because they have convinced themselves of their own inadequacy. I think there are several reasons why this seems to be more of a problem today.

One reason, I suspect, is that feelings of inadequacy are a result of our culture which promotes the idea that a person has to be number one. Second place is worthless. You have to be superior to others in some way. It doesn't even seem to matter in what a person is superior, just so that he is superior. Even some parents try to push their children to make them superior in some way. The feelings of inadequacy, then, are the result of a person's faulty perspective of his abilities. He is not important unless he is the best in some way.

Sometimes children are too dependent upon the valuation of others. Children who are frequently trying to promote themselves often do it by degrading others. Some children are too ready to accept the opinions of their peers and behave accordingly. Perhaps as parents and teachers we sometimes encourage our children to accept too willingly the opinions of their peers.

Another cause is the current atmosphere of permissiveness, “freedom” and indulgence which prevails in many homes. Children need the firm guidance of their parents. They need to know that discipline will be exercised when they break the rules. They need the security of a God-fearing home in which there is love, concern for their problems, interest in their affairs, support for them in difficulties, duties for them to perform, without pay, for the welfare of the whole family and the knowledge of their essential place as children in their family.

The Christian does not immerse himself in gloom and self-reproach. Nor should he be dependent upon the valuation of other people. For some incomprehensible reason God esteems him in Christ. If God holds him in esteem, he is wrong to consider himself without value. The Christian has confidence because God has chosen him, and God will never reject him. He is confident in the certainty of God’s faithfulness.

We need to teach ourselves and our children that we do not need self-esteem, we need God-esteem. We know that God esteems those who are of a broken and contrite heart—the meek and the humble. Our hope, our confidence, our value are all in Christ only and are ours because He made Himself a servant for us. “Where is boasting then? It is excluded.” Romans 3: 27a If we have the esteem of God in

Christ, then self-esteem disappears and we have confidence in God and in His love and in the certainty of our own salvation.

It is indeed amazing that some Christians have been persuaded that feelings of guilt are harmful. The first step in the process of redemption is the knowledge of our sin and misery—that’s guilt, personal and total. If we don’t know that guilt and confess it, the way of salvation is closed to us. Feelings of guilt are absolutely essential for us to experience the removal of that guilt in Christ. It is no wonder, then, that Satan and the wicked world would like to destroy the concept of guilt.

There are many defenders of the self-esteem movement in the Christian community. They say, “No child is going to do his best work or behave as he should without encouragement. Parents and teachers alike encourage a child by praising his work or his behavior. In this way they promote his self-esteem. By making the child feel good about himself you promote desirable behavior. Every parent and teacher does this and ought to do it.” They see the alternative as only criticism of the child.

It is true that parents and teachers do and ought to encourage their children and praise them when their behavior and performance warrant such praise. I think though, that there is a considerable difference between what the Christian teacher or parent does and the reasons for it and what the self-esteem promoters are trying to do.

The Christian parent or teacher recognizes sin in his children, admonishes, guides, and punishes for sinful behavior. He tries to teach the child that the child alone is ultimately responsible for his sin. But the Christian also demonstrates forgiveness and shows that he

loves the child. He loves the child—not because the child is so skilled; not because his behavior is so perfect; not because the child in himself is so wonderful—but because this child is one of God’s children and has been entrusted to our care to guide him on the way of salvation.

Of course the Christian parent or teacher encourages his children. Remember that even though the good things we do in our lives are only the result of the work of the Spirit in our hearts, yet God says to us, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.” So we also praise the child who has been obedient and who has used his time and his talents well.

Those who promote self-esteem as the solution to problems are very much afraid that they will cause a child to feel guilty. Yet if we study our Bibles carefully, we must feel very guilty. It is very clear that God wants us to feel guilty so that we may realize that we cannot escape this guilt by ourselves and may learn to seek for justification in Christ. The problems that people suffer when they feel guilty are due to the fact that they refuse to admit that the only relief from guilt is in Christ. And because they will not turn to Christ, they try to avoid the guilt.

Feelings of guilt do not cause us Christians to drown ourselves in gloom, remorse, and self-reproach. For some incomprehensible reason, God esteems us for Christ’s sake. We are confident in the certainty of God’s faithfulness to His promises. God esteems us; the esteem of others is not important. I suspect that many of the problems of children today are due to the fact that they are constantly striving for the esteem of their peers and are indifferent to the esteem of God.

Parents can make their children feel as though they are an important part of the family by giving them duties to perform within their capacities and insisting that they perform their duties faithfully and well. Parents can show that they are concerned about their children’s welfare by leading them firmly in the way of righteousness and refusing them things that will harm their minds as well as their bodies. Parents can show their interest in their children by giving them of their time, their attention, and their help. I fear many parents deny their children these things and hope to compensate for their lack by giving their children an abundance of material things and indulging all their whims. Teachers, too, need to show interest in their students and concern for their welfare.

I think I have known children who did not function well because of feelings of inadequacy. In such cases the problem lies in the child’s faulty perception of himself. Does he feel that he does not want to perform because his performance will not be superior? Have we taught some children that if you are not first, you are not anything? There is a great deal of emphasis today upon being “number 1.” Are we, perhaps, encouraging such problems in our children? We have to remind ourselves and our children that God will never ask us what our rank was in our class or school, nor will he ask us how often we appeared on the honor roll or what awards we have received. He will only ask us what we have done with what He gave us. With that kind of perspective no person ever needs to feel inadequate.

These times are really not so different from the days of the prophet Malachi nor are people today different at all. The causes of problems and their solutions are the same today as they were then:

“Your words have been stout against me, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee?

Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of Hosts.

And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yet, they that tempt God are even delivered.

Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name.

And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of Hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.

Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not.”

Malachi 3: 13-18

SPORTS AND THE SCHOOL PROGRAM

Please don't get me wrong: I enjoy sports. I coached many sports for years; I like to play a game now and then; I enjoy watching almost any kind of sport. In fact, I have to watch myself or I'll spend too much time watching sports on TV. I think sports are wonderful for maintaining fitness, for a way of enjoying friendships, and for relaxation and entertainment. But it seems to me that the uses of sports today are too often not appropriate for Christians.

For one thing, sports have become so terribly important to many people that their lives revolve around sports—practicing, watching, participating. Did I hear you say that you don't place too much importance upon sports? Answer these questions to yourself a moment: How much money do you spend in a year on sports including equipment, admission fees, and such things? How much time do you spend in a year participating in sports, watching them, reading about them, or discussing them with others? How much of your conversations with others are concerned with sports? The answers to these questions will demonstrate how important sports are to you.

I think all of you will agree that sports should not be so very important in the lives of Christians. Yet in various ways we communicate to our children and young people that sports are extremely important. If you neglect church activities and school functions like PTA, but you rarely miss a basketball game, you will demonstrate to your children what you really feel is important.

I am always surprised at how angry people can get if I speak lightly of sports or suggest that they should be curtailed. Folks don't seem to

get very excited about other activities of the church or school, but if you threaten their sports, they will become first defensive and then furious. Just listen to the conversations of your children and notice how important sports are to them. Many of our children seem consumed with sports so that they see little value in any other activity. That worries me.

Why are sports so important to us? Are we so interested in physical fitness? For some, yes, but for most fitness is only a part of the attraction of sports as shown by the fact that far greater numbers of people are spectators than participants. Do we enjoy the beauty of action in the well-conditioned athlete? Yes, that's certainly a part of our fascination with sports, but I don't hear much comment on the beauty unless it's connected with a victory. Observing my own feelings and the responses of others, I think the main reason is very simple: we want to win or to be associated with someone who wins.

It seems that winning has become more and more important. Years ago there used to be talk about a contest to see which was the better team. I think there was more emphasis upon "sportsmanship," which meant winning with modesty, losing with grace, promoting the team over the individual, fairness, enjoyment of the game more than the result. In those times people were not always successful in promoting those qualities because they seem to be against the nature of competition, but many people tried. It was considered improper for the spectators to scream or otherwise try to distract players in order to prevent them from performing well. If spectators criticized referees publicly, they were considered most unsportsmanlike. Coaches were acting most improperly if they tried to "work the refs." "Showboating," stirring up the crowd, gloating by such actions as the "high fives" or motions with the fist, visible dissatisfaction with

decisions of umpires or referees all used to be causes for removal from the game. Too often today we are not at all concerned with seeing which is the better team; we are concerned with having more points than our opponents—winning—by whatever means it takes.

Why are we so concerned with winning? After all, is it really important that the numbers which show how many times our guys threw the ball through the ring or were able to run all the way around the bases were bigger than those of the other guys? Or that the numbers for me were lower than those of the other guy if they show how many times I hit the ball with the stick in order to get it into eighteen different holes? From what I have observed in myself and understood from the conversations of others, it is indeed important. The numbers show not only that we are better at the game than others, but also how we are better people than those others and also that those of us who are associated with the winners are better people and that our school or other institution is better than theirs. Unless, of course, their numbers are better than ours, in which case they show that winning doesn't mean anything except that we didn't really care to try very hard, and that we had an off night, and that the referees or umpires aren't fair, and that the other people don't play according to the rules. But we really agree with the old saying of Vince Lombardi, "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing."

Sports can be very valuable as a means of maintaining physical fitness and as a means of relaxing from the tensions of one's job. The difficulty is that these values become of secondary importance at best when the sports become spectator sports, especially if they are interscholastic spectator sports.

One of the greatest difficulties of having sports as part of the school's function is that it is unlike school subjects. Of the school subjects we can say that each one is designed to provide the student with knowledge and skills that he will need in his life in the world as a servant of Christ. These skills are valuable for him to provide for his family, to contribute to the welfare of others, and to help him fulfill his calling in the church. Throwing a ball through a ring or hitting a ball with a stick doesn't seem to do any of those things. Even being able consistently to score more points than others falls short of a useful contribution to ourselves or to others. The skill or knowledge that we acquire in these activities doesn't seem to have much real value. The physical fitness that we acquire is good for us, but it is not the goal, only the byproduct. If fitness were the real goal, we could attain it more quickly with less expenditure of time by other means such as regular calisthenics or intramural sports.

Many people speak of the values of interscholastic sports. They speak of the game as being comparable to real life, so that participation in sports will build character. Although sports do develop character, as do all our activities, I'm not at all sure that we want to develop the kind of character that we often get from sports participation. Some say that in sports a person learns to work with others toward a common goal, he has to learn how to deal with defeat as well as how to deal with success, he has to learn to put forth maximum effort to attain a goal, and other such benefits.

I see several problems with the use of sports as a builder of character. If we really want to teach young people how to strive for a goal, shouldn't we use an activity which has a goal with some real value? If we use sports for this purpose, are we not communicating the idea that sports indeed do have great value and are worthy of so much

effort? Or should we tell our young people after they have gained these benefits, "OK, now you have to use the qualities you have developed toward a goal that is really worthy"?

Another problem with using interscholastic sports as a builder of character is that we are trying to build character in an atmosphere which is not much conducive to building Christian character. When we play interscholastic sports, we do it in the way that the world does it. I don't think I have to prove that the world does not build character through their sports programs. It seems that most people are agreed that, when it comes to sports, an individual or a team cannot be consistently successful unless it has the "killer instinct." For sports, we usually agree with the maxim, "Nice guys finish last." Remember the pep rally: "We're going to win, win, win!"

I know there are some coaches who sincerely try to promote spiritual virtues, but it seems to me that the sports program cannot effectively promote them. We all know what the atmosphere at a game is like. It may not be a wrong atmosphere, but it is not the kind of situation which is conducive to development of Christian virtues. In fact, it seems more likely that contrary qualities will flourish in the conditions most common in practices and games. Even if the coaches and staff were working hard at teaching real values, the spectators and most opponents certainly do not.

If it were true that sports are effective builders of Christian character, wouldn't it be improper to allow only a few to have this opportunity? Why shouldn't we strive to include everybody in the program by using larger teams or by changing the personnel on the teams every few weeks or at least a couple of times during a season. We both know

why: then we wouldn't win, and winning is the name of the game in interscholastic sports.

In my observation of athletes, listening to them, reading of them, and having some contact with them, I find their most common characteristic is pride. One of the main reasons for participating in sports is the desire for recognition. Those who are successful are nearly always very proud. This is not surprising in view of the fact that many people in our culture glorify the athlete and reward him with fame, wealth, and authority on all questions. The farther they go in the sport, the more proud they become until they act as though they are not bound by laws and conventions as are ordinary mortals. It is very difficult for the athlete to avoid pride. But pride is listed in the Bible as the greatest of sins, one which may exclude a person from the kingdom of heaven. "Verily I say until you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." It is frightening to me to think that we may have a program in our schools which actually encourages pride in our young people.

I see our children carrying about with them and admiring pictures of professional athletes whom we know to be men whose arrogance is so great they feel themselves to be above the laws of God Himself. I see children trying to emulate those athletes on the basketball court in their attempts to win by any means, in their attempts to "showboat" for their own pride, in their contempt for those who are concerned about their studies and those who may be less athletically skilled than they. I see the names of a "successful" team emblazoned upon T-shirts. Are they better people than the members of an "unsuccessful" team? Would we not be rightly offended if the names

of members of the honor roll were advertised in the same way upon T-shirts?

The problems do not lie with sports themselves. The problems lie with the excessive emphasis upon sports and with the misuse of sports. I'm afraid that to correct the problems associated with spectator interscholastic sports, we would have to change our culture, something we cannot do. It's possible, in theory, that we could arrange an intramural sports program emphasizing the broadest participation possible and vigorously promoting proper behavior and attitudes among participants and spectators in addition to physical fitness. I think there could be some genuine benefits for our children and their spiritual growth in such a program.

I can imagine what such a program would be like in our schools. Those who were least skilled or who needed the physical development would play most. Praise would be greatest for those who helped and encouraged others. Scores would be irrelevant or used only as a measure of progress. Success would be measured by improvement in learning the rules and skills of the game, by adherence to rules of the game, by display of sportsmanship, and by enjoyment of all participants. I can hear many people saying, "But that wouldn't be any fun." I wonder. . .