

The School's Calling to Teach the Children to Keep the Way of the Lord

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It was my privilege to receive my grade school education from the third grade on in a Protestant Reformed School. The memories of this training are overwhelmingly favorable, but I also have certain bad memories concerning this training. All of these bad memories have to do with what I consider to have been a shortcoming in the school, a shortcoming as regards teaching

the children to live a Christian life. I all too distinctly remember, for example, that almost all of us children in the upper grades at one time carried on a campaign of cruelty against a certain child, a campaign that went on and on, as I remember, and that consisted of ostracizing that child and constantly referring to that child, to that child's face, in such terms as "stinky", meanwhile holding our noses. I also recall with sorrow that we boys in the upper grades would engage in fist fights, not an infrequent blow-up that you can expect from boys of that age, but a regular thing. Those fist fights often resulted in bloody noses and even broken hands. They would occur on the playground, and they would even occur in the classroom during the lunch hour.

I do not intend to criticize the teachers concerning these things because they were our sins, part of the sins of youth that often we have prayed God not to remember against us. Nor do I mean to indicate that the teachers tolerated this evil behavior. I remember very well how angry a certain teacher was when she caught us fist-fighting on the playground (to this day I can see her blazing eyes) and that she chastised us for that sin by making us stay in and write lines. What troubles me, however, is that no matter how I search my memory I can not recall that there ever was any warning to us boys that by this behavior we were guilty of murder in breaking the sixth commandment of the law of God, or that there was ever any exhortation of us to love each other as fellow citizens of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nor do I remember that anyone ever addressed us, singly or collectively, concerning our destruction of that student whom we were attacking, perhaps even by applying the words of I Corinthians 12:23ff. to the situation, words, you will remember, that have to do with bestowing more abundant honor upon members of the body of Christ which we think to be less honorable, and words that conclude that there should be no schism in the body but that the members should have the same care one for another.

Looking back, I wonder whether there was much emphasis on teaching the children to live a Christian life. I wonder whether the school rather was not viewed as a place where subjects were taught and where all of the emphasis lay upon the fact that those subjects had to be taught in harmony with the faith that we hold dear, the Reformed faith. Perhaps, I am wrong. Perhaps, my memory is faulty. Perhaps, these admonitions were given, but we did not let them make any impression on us. I hope I am wrong.

But if it were the case that there was not this emphasis on living the Christian life, there was a serious lack in the education itself, for the Christian school has the calling to teach the children to walk in the way of the Lord.

It is my conviction that the Christian school has an important role in teaching the children to live a responsible Christian life. You may describe this calling in different ways. You may use the terminology of the topic assigned to me this morning: "Teaching the children to live a responsible Christian life." You might also speak of teaching the children to keep God's commandments which is how Psalm 78 puts it. I prefer to use the words of Genesis 18:19 "...teaching the children to keep the way of the Lord." God speaks to Abraham here and says, "For I know him (that is, Abraham), that he will command his children and his household after him and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him."

Not only is the teaching of the children to keep the way of the Lord a role that the school plays, but I contend that it is a solemn, important, divine calling upon the Christian school and upon every teacher in our Christian schools. That this is so should be plain, first of all, from the fact that it is simply impossible for the school to refrain from teaching the children to keep the way of the Lord. There is evidence of that impossibility. For one thing there will be instruction concerning Christian living in the very example that the teacher himself sets personally. The teacher will display, and cannot help but display, love for God and obedience unto God's law--for example, his faithfulness to his task, his fairness, his kindness to the students, especially to those who are in some kind of distress, his godly speech, and the like. In his life among the students, the Christian school teacher will display these characteristics, and they will be instructive for the children regarding their own life. Also, there will be such instruction in the formal aspects of the education. I refer to such things as the fact that students are expected to be on time; the fact that the students are required to do their assignments and to do them in the allotted time; the fact that they are forbidden to interfere with the work of the other students; and the fact that they are required to obey the ordinary commands of the teacher, even such a command as "take out your books now." The very structure of the teaching itself teaches the children to keep the way of the

Lord. In addition, there will be such instruction in the unavoidable discipline that goes on in the school. The teacher rebukes, warns, and chastises. In every rebuke there is an implied judgment on certain behavior that that behavior is evil and an implied judgment on other behavior that that behavior is good. This all by itself teaches the children to keep the way of the Lord. Besides, teaching the children to keep the ways of God is an integral part of the actual teaching of the subject material. Unavoidably, you will be teaching the children to keep the way of the Lord. You cannot possibly teach history without condemning revolution and the idolatry of Greece and Rome. You cannot possibly teach literature without saying something about the deification of man, about despair and hope, about vengeance, and about guilt.

Such is the impossibility of the schools not teaching the children to keep the way of the Lord that the alternative is that the teaching teaches them to despise the way of the Lord. It is either/or. Either the school teaches them to keep the way of the Lord or the school must necessarily teach them to despise the way of the Lord. That is after all what goes on day after day, year in and year out, in the public schools of our land. We should remember this if we are inclined for some reason to minimize or to remove the teaching of the children to keep Jehovah's way. This then cannot be the issue—whether it is possible not to teach the children to keep the ways of the Lord. It is simply impossible not to do this in the Christian school.

Is such teaching merely an unavoidable but completely secondary aspect of the work of the school? Is this instruction a sort of accidental by-product of the school's labor? Or is it the case that this teaching itself is an important part of the school's, that is the teacher's, task? Is it even the case that this is the teacher's calling from God? Could it be that teaching the children to keep the way of the Lord is the main purpose for which the school has been established, and that every other aspect of the work of the school, including the teaching of the subjects and the development of the child's natural abilities, are subservient to this spiritual-ethical, practical instruction?

How we answer these questions will make all the difference in the world as to what kind of schools we have and as to what kind of work the teachers give themselves to do. If our answer is the former, that is, if our answer is that teaching the children to

keep the way of Jehovah is merely an accidental, secondary aspect of the school's calling, we will not concern ourselves overly much that there is a student who is called "Stinky," as long as all of the students, and "Stinky," get good grades in all of the subjects of the curriculum. We will not make much of it that "glorious" Greece was an abominable pest house of idolatry and homosexuality. Indeed a student may never even hear, much less have impressed upon him, that this was the truth about "glorious" Greece, for the only concern of the teacher will be that the student knows all of the Greek city states, the names of all of the philosophers and orators, and the names of all of the gods in Greece's pantheon.

But if the answer to our questions is the latter, that is, if we maintain that one of the main aspects of the calling of the teacher in the Christian school is to teach the children to keep the way of the Lord, that this, in fact, is the main calling of the Christian school, then we will stop all the wheels of the machinery of education, if necessary, until the students confess their sin of hatred of the neighbor and be reconciled to "Stinky." The teaching of the history of Greece and Rome will, without sacrificing any knowledge of the facts, impress upon the students the judgment of God on the ungodliness and unrighteousness of those men, which teaching, implicitly or explicitly, will be accompanied by instruction of the covenant children how themselves to live uprightly in the world before the face of God.

Our answer, in the Protestant Reformed Christian schools—genuine Christian schools, must be that the school has a calling to teach the children to keep the way of Jehovah, indeed that this is the main calling of the school. This is the task to which all of the other admittedly important tasks are subservient. The main task of you teachers then is not academic and intellectual. The main task is spiritual-ethical and practical in nature.

The proof of this is, first of all, the history of Christian day-school education. The Christian school did not begin with us. It has a long and honorable history. The testimony of that history without exception is that the Christian school must teach the children to keep the way of Jehovah. The Christian school must teach the children to live responsible Christian lives in the world. Because I am going to be a student of brevity this morning, believe it or not, I will bring up only one instance from history that substantiates this assertion. That instance is the original

version of Art. 21 of the church order of Dordt. You will remember that the present version of that article reads as follows: "The consistory shall see to it that there are good Christian schools in which the parents have their children instructed according to the demands of the covenant." That was not how the article originally read; originally the article said this: "Everywhere consistories shall see to it that there are good schoolmasters who shall not only instruct the children in reading, writing, languages, and the liberal arts, but likewise in godliness and the Catechism!" Ah, there you have it—"but likewise in godliness and the Catechism!" That article was worded in such a way as to ward off a very real danger. That very real danger is that only the subjects be taught and that the schoolmaster only concern himself with the development of the natural abilities of the students. That article was worded in such a way as to place strong emphasis on godliness and the Heidelberg Catechism; godliness and the Catechism are mentioned last in the article. Now, this perfectly captures the spirit of the entire history of Christian education. I admit that we no longer have this version of the church order. It has been changed. However, the reason for that change was not opposition to the parochialism that was implied in that original version—the consistory shall see to it that there are good schoolmasters. That went in the direction of parochialism. Because of our clearer insight that Christian school education must be parental, this version was changed somewhat. Nevertheless our present version of this article really incorporates that same insistence on the teaching of godliness, for our present version speaks of good Christian schools *according to the demand of the covenant*. The demand of the covenant is the demand for teaching the children to keep the way of Jehovah. This is plain in every passage of Scripture that calls the parents to teach their children. This is plain, therefore, in every passage of Scripture on which our Christian schools are founded. Every passage not only mentions this as an element of the instruction that parents must give their children, but also maintains that this shall be the content and purpose of all of the instruction that parents give their children. The content and purpose of the instruction that covenant parents give their children must be this, that we teach them to live rightly.

Let me briefly illustrate this from several representative passages of Holy Scripture. First of all, this is evident in the

well-known sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, verses four and following. This passage calls parents in Israel to teach their children diligently. We read that parents must teach "them" diligently to their children, namely, "these words of verse six, which words are these: "The Lord our God is one Lord, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart and with all thy mind and with all thy strength." That is what the parents in Israel must teach diligently to their children. They must teach their children: "Jehovah our God is one Jehovah, and you must love him with all that you are." Negatively, the purpose of this teaching, according to later verses in Deuteronomy 6, is that we and our children not forget Jehovah—not forget Jehovah when we are solidly established in our land flowing with milk and honey, in the midst of our flourishing farms and industries, and then, inevitably, go after the other gods. This is the purpose of the instruction of our children.

This is also evident from the Psalm which was read this morning, Psalm 78, the first eight verses. This, of course, is a grand covenant Psalm. We have sung it so many times at baptisms, at confessions of faith, and at convocations and graduations of the Christian schools. This Psalm insists that fathers must teach the Lord's praises to their children with the purpose, according to vs. 7, "that they might set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments."

Of the book of Proverbs, nothing has to be said, because the practical nature of the instruction that the believing father gives to his child is simply there to be seen by anyone.

Also Genesis 18:19 brings out clearly that we must instruct our children to keep the way of the Lord. "For I know him," God says there, "that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord." Abraham's total command of his children and household has the nature and purpose to teach his household to keep the way of Jehovah, which is then further defined as doing justice and judgment.

These passages are applicable to the Christian school. They constitute the very basis of our schools. We may not adopt this basis and then elide the unique content and purpose of the instruction that is proposed in this basis. True, the calling in these passages is directed to parents. The parents must see to it that the children keep God's commandments. However, the

Christian school represents the parents' delegating the carrying out of this calling in certain respects to teachers who come to stand in their place. When the parents do this, when they give over this calling in certain respects to the Christian school, the parents cannot change the nature and purpose of the calling. That calling is laid down forever with finality by God, and that calling is: "Teach the children to keep My way."

This kind of instruction is desperately needed. It is needed by our children. Of course, I do not mean that they need this instruction in the school in place of instruction in the home and the church, but I mean that they need this in the school along side of that same instruction which they get in the home and in the church. That is due to the sinful nature of our children. The need for this is sharpened by the times in which we live. On every hand, by every means, our children are tempted to depart from the way of the Lord. The world is a gigantic school. It attempts to teach our children to depart from God's way in every form of ungodliness and unrighteousness. In the midst of it stands a school that teaches them to keep Jehovah's way.

We may briefly answer the question, How does the teacher do this? In the first place, this calling to teach the children to keep God's way must frame the teacher's view of his task. How does the teacher look at his task? What is his perspective when he steps back and looks at himself and what he is doing? He must conceive his task to be teaching the children not only to *know* God's way, but also to *keep* God's way. This is the word Jehovah used in Genesis 18:19: "*keep*". The teacher must see himself and his relationship to the child more as a master in relationship to the master's disciples than as a lecturer to his audience. And even that does not say enough. He must view himself as the parent in whose place he stands, bringing up these children to keep the ways of the Lord.

Having this view of his task, the Christian school teacher will teach obedience of life, first, in and with the subjects of the curriculum. When I say that it is calling of the teacher to do this spiritual-ethical, practical work, I do not, of course, intend that he dispense with the subjects and replace them with courses in ethics. I do not even mean that the Christian school should add a course in Christian living. Not at all. The school must teach the subjects. Yes, but it must teach the subjects so, that every thought of the child is in captivity to Christ and thus the child

keeps the way of Jehovah with his mind. Keeping the way of Jehovah is not something that is only done with the body or even primarily done with the body. After all, Deuteronomy 6 demands that the child love the Lord his God with his *mind*. This is basic to any child's keeping the way of Jehovah with his body. What are his thoughts? On what way is he walking with his soul? That will determine how he behaves himself with his body. To keep the way of the Lord is taught by teaching every subject in the light of Holy Scripture and to the end that God be glorified. In and with the teaching of the subjects, there may be no hesitation to draw out for the students such practical implication as the good and bad use of music—what music to listen to and what music not to listen to; what kind of books to read and what kind of books and magazines to avoid; and the like.

Having the right view of his task, the Christian school teacher will teach the children to obey God's commandments, secondly, by godly discipline. I mean here not only discipline in the narrower sense of chastisement, but also discipline in the broader sense of an ordering of the child's life. It includes such a thing as seeing to it that a tall girl does not slump, but confidently maintains her posture. The teacher must see the necessity to rebuke and chasten not as some extraneous matter to be gotten out of the way as quickly as possible so that he can go on with the main course of teaching the subjects, but as an essential aspect of his task, as the reason why he is there, as the reason why the child is there. He will handle all matters of discipline, then, wisely and carefully. The teacher will rebuke in love; he will condemn error in terms of God's law and in light of the covenant standing of the children. When he calls them to obedience, whether the obedience of taking out their books or the obedience of loving one another on the playground, he will do so in terms of their gratitude toward their covenant God for bringing them out of the bondage of sin and death through Jesus Christ. Certainly, there will be some matters that will need to be given over to the parents. Maybe, there will be matters that have to be referred to the pastor of the church, with the consent of the parents. But it is impossible to turn all disciplinary matters which arise in school over to parents and pastors. Even if this were possible, it would not be preferable; for the simple fact is, as every parent knows, that there are many things that must be dealt with when they occur, and, if they are not dealt with when

they occur, it is really impossible later on to deal with them at all. This is an awesome responsibility. But what else do we mean when we say that the Christian school teacher stands in the place of the parent? To say that is to acknowledge the awesome responsibility of every teacher in the Christian school. He is responsible for nothing less than rearing the covenant child to walk in God's way and not to depart from it. Like the parent, the teacher who takes this seriously trembles at his calling.

Thirdly, as I have already indicated, you teach the children to keep the Lord's way by your own example. The love of God has to be on your forehead, as it has to be on the forehead of the parent in whose place you stand.

The school, then, is not only preparatory for life in the future, but it is the place of living, the place where the child lives today. The school, then, is not a think tank for brains, but a place of the rearing of the whole covenant child.

If this be so, if the school has this calling, teachers are required who themselves know, love, and walk in the way of Jehovah. Required are teachers who are one with us parents in our regard for this ultimate goal of all of the upbringing of the children. It is not so important to me what kind of a person you are, if you are only going to be teaching my children how much 2 and 2 is; but if you are going to be teaching my children to keep the way of the Lord, then I care a great deal what kind of a person you are. I care a great deal about your spiritual qualifications, whether you are one with me in your knowledge of the way of the Lord, whether you stand with me in the warnings and prohibitions and exhortation that I give my children concerning the Christian life. I will not stand for it that you and I work at cross purposes in this vital matter.

It is striking that the requirement in Scripture for those who teach covenant children is that they themselves are keeping the way of the Lord. Think of Deuteronomy 6 once more. How does that begin? "And these words shall be in thine heart." Only then does it add: "thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children." How does Genesis 18 begin? "And I know him" This is what Jehovah says about Abraham, "I know Abraham." This does not mean that God knows that Abraham is going to command his children so that they will keep the way of the Lord. The text does not speak of God knowing *something*, but it speaks of God knowing *someone*. God knows *Abraham*, knows him with the

personal knowledge of electing love. Only as someone known by God can and will Abraham then go on to command his household so that they do justice and judgment.

To carry out the high calling of commanding the children to keep Jehovah's way, one must himself be keeping the way of Jehovah. So, the Christian school teacher must have spiritual qualifications as well as academic qualifications. I have no hesitation to say that the spiritual qualifications are the primary qualifications as far as the Christian school teacher is concerned. The primary qualification is that he be a godly man, or that she be a godly woman. What we need, and, thank God, what we have, are good school masters and good school marms, good because they have been born again and because they are indwelt by the good and Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. This godliness must be exercised, must be daily exercised, by the Christian school teacher who keeps himself, by the grace of God, in Jehovah's way. Thus, he can teach the children to keep the way of the Lord.

I thank you.