

Special Education, Protestant Reformed, Why?

by Gertrude Hoeksema

Note: During the past year I have been giving Bible instruction to some of the handicapped children who belong to my home congregation of Hudsonville. As a result of this small beginning, the consistory of Hudsonville took the initiative in calling a meeting for the purpose of organizing a society for Protestant Reformed Special Education. The society was organized this past spring and now has a seven-member board. Under their leadership, I have been preparing principles for special education, and materials and methods for a proposed covenant school for our own handicapped children.

At a "picnic-meeting," sponsored by the Publicity Committee of the board and held at Spring Grove Park in Jamestown on August 6, a panel discussion was given on the topic: Special Education, Protestant Reformed, Why? After the presentation, the editor of Perspectives asked me to "write something up" for the magazine. I have prepared an expanded version of the necessarily short one at the picnic.

INTRODUCTION

Protestant Reformed education is covenant education. Protestant Reformed education for our special children, the mentally impaired, is covenant education, too. We as God's covenant people are seeking — and it is more than time that we are — to establish a covenant school for the rather severely handicapped children in our churches. As we contemplate opening the doors of such a school in the near future, we realize that we need a solid foundation, a philosophy of covenant education for our handicapped pupils. In our panel discussion we did not presume to establish a complete philosophy nor foundation, for that takes time, study, reflection, and a certain amount of experience.

Rather, we scratched the surface; and we did it by turning to our beautiful Form for the Administration of Baptism, stressing three things as they applied to our handicapped children: Our Covenant Obligation; The Receptivity of our Covenant Special Children; and Our Covenant Calling.

OUR COVENANT OBLIGATION

When one reads the Baptism Form and thinks of our average, normal children, he is struck each time by its simple beauty and its great comfort. When one reads it with our mentally handicapped children in mind, it takes on a special measure of depth and assurance; for the Form keeps reminding us that our God is a *covenant* God. Read the following quotation with a handicapped child in mind: "For when we are baptized in the name of the Father, God the Father witnesseth and sealeth unto us, that he doth make an eternal covenant of grace with us, and adopts us for his children and heirs, and therefore will provide us with every good thing, and avert all evil or turn it to our profit."

Remember, our covenant God made that covenant with us and with our handicapped children. In fact, in His wisdom, He *gave* us handicapped covenant children, some of whom will never on this earth be able to grasp more than the simplest concepts about our Father's covenant blessings. He adopted our *special children*, too, as His heirs; and His promise to provide every good thing and avert all evil or turn it to our profit is for *them*, too.

Those are the beautiful promises of our God. But He gave us more than promises. Our covenant God gave us our *obligations* — our part of the covenant, if you will — and the Baptism Form goes on to instruct us about those obligations: that we are "admonished of, and obliged unto new obedience, namely, that we cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; that we trust in him, and love him with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our mind, and with all our strength; that we forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life."

However, our Father saw fit to give those obligations not merely to ourselves, to those who have already reached maturity. Those obligations are for our children, too; for God has told us, "I will establish my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant; to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee." That seed includes our handicapped children. They, too, are obliged to a new obedience, obliged to trust in Him and love Him, and to forsake the world and walk in a new and holy life. How is that possible when many of them cannot fully grasp all these concepts? The Baptism Form helps us out on that, too.

Have you ever been struck by this phrase in the Form? "And although our young children do not understand these things. . . ." Ever since I have worked with handicapped children, I have. These children will never fully understand the riches of their covenant blessings on this

side of heaven, but they, too, as well as normal infants, may be "received unto grace in Christ."

What, then, are the covenant obligations of parents, of their families, and of the church of Christ regarding our handicapped children? We will be obedient to our part of the covenant. According to their capacities, we will teach our special children about "this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." We will teach them the simple truths of God's wonders and greatness in creation and in salvation. We will teach them the law, and remind them over and over to obey it, to be sorry when they disobey, and to seek God's forgiveness. We will teach them to trust in Him, to pray to Him, to love Him, and to walk in His ways; for our Baptism Form admonishes us to "instruct our children herein, when they shall arrive to years of discretion."

THEIR RECEPTIVITY

We have the promise of God's Word that our covenant children will be *receptive* to the truths He has taught them in His revelation; and His promise is to *all* His children, also those whose minds cannot comprehend His revelation in all its riches. For God calls them "my children" in Ezekiel 16:21, and says "they are holy" in I Corinthians 7:14. The Baptism Form puts it this way in the first question asked of parents: "Whether you acknowledge. . . that they are *sanctified* in Christ. . . ."

The rich meaning of this phrase is that His children, His sanctified children, are receptive to the teachings of Scripture and they will respond according to their abilities.

Have you ever watched the receptivity of a mentally handicapped child as he is engaged in functional learning? Usually he is much more eager, much more responsive and enthusiastic than the average child, who soon learns how to hide his feelings. The handicapped child often "bubbles." He is affectionate. He wants to please. So he listens well to the reading lesson and he tries hard to spell the words. He is receptive to the teaching he is receiving. Sometimes he has success and spells the words correctly, and more often he does not. In learning, he keeps trying even though he often fails.

Now let us look at that receptivity from a spiritual point of view. In the realm of the spiritual, these handicapped children must cope with abstract concepts: faith, grace, rebirth, atonement. . . . Will they fail there, too? Before I answer the question, let me make a confession. Before I started teaching Bible studies to handicapped children last year, I was scared. I was *nervous* when I entered the classroom for the first lesson. Why? I was afraid I could not get them to understand

spiritual realities. Now I know why I was scared. I was trying to do the teaching all by myself; and was completely underestimating the work of the Spirit of Christ in the hearts of these His special children. I had forgotten to do my homework before I came to class: I did not read this sentence "In like manner, when we are baptized in the name of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost assures us, by this holy sacrament, that he will dwell in us, and sanctify us to be members of Christ. . . ." As I met that first session with each child individually, and in every session thereafter, we all experienced the sanctifying power of the Spirit in little Room 3 in Hudsonville Church. No, handicapped children do not fail when Christ's Spirit is their teacher. They cannot fail, for they have the promise that He will guide them into the truth.

Let me share with you the beautiful receptivity of our covenant handicapped children. After the stories of the Pharisees complaining about Jesus' healing the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda on the sabbath, after they argued about the disciples plucking corn and eating it on the sabbath, I went on to tell about the healing of the man with the withered hand on the sabbath, and started, "Then the Pharisees. . ." and that's as far as I got. I had a flood of tears and a blocking of the ears as my little girl wailed, "I *bate* them! Don't talk about them! They did that to my Jesus!" In her simple way, she understood the antithesis.

Another handicapped pupil listened intently to the story of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha, meanwhile rocking back and forth incessantly on her chair. After we had finished the part about Mary choosing "that good part," she suddenly stopped rocking, sat very still, and said in a disappointed voice, "Oh, I'm not like Mary. Sure, I like to listen to Jesus. But I never was very good at sitting still. And I'm sorry, Mrs. Hoeksema, but I'm more like Martha. I'd much rather *do* some nice things for Jesus." This dear girl recognized her limitations and wanted to show her love through *service*.

And how does one teach the mysteries of the kingdom to a deaf child, mentally impaired, and mostly mute? How would I teach her about sin and repentance? I didn't. She taught me. When she saw the word *sin* she wrote, *bad, mad*; and when I pointed to *repent*, she wrote *sorry*, meanwhile making motions of tears coursing down her cheeks and pointing to her heart. She not only understood it. She experienced it. This same child was enthralled by the story of Jesus stilling the tempest. When I told her that the disciples in the boat were still afraid *after* Jesus said, "Peace, be still," and the sea was calm, because they knew that the holy God was there in the boat with them, I asked her, "Would you have been afraid, too?"

She motioned for time to think. Then she wrote:

God is love.
Jesus is God.
I not afraid.

Yes, we saw the Spirit working there in Room 3, making these handicapped children receptive to His work in their hearts, so that they would giggle with joy when I asked them, "Where do *you* find the water of life?" and they would point to the open Bible or to their receptive hearts.

OUR COVENANT CALLING

It follows, then, from the covenant obligations which God has placed upon the parents and from the spiritual receptivity which He affords to the children, that the parents of our special children have a lifelong *calling* to fulfil their obligations, often a more burdensome task than that of most other parents. When these children were baptized we heard, from our beautiful Baptism Form, that "parents are in duty bound, further to instruct their children herein, when they shall arrive to years of discretion." Then the parents stood and answered the third question that the pastor solemnly asked them: "Whether you promise and intend to see these children, when come to the years of discretion instructed and brought up in the aforesaid doctrine, or help or cause them to be instructed therein to the utmost of your power?"

But...their children were handicapped — mentally. How *could* they fulfil that calling with these special children when they came to years of discretion? We understand that years of discretion differ with individual children and differ greatly in handicapped children, but we know that the term generally means "years of understanding," and as soon as they can understand, we begin instructing them in the truths of God and of His revelation, according to their abilities.

These burdened parents need help in training their children in God's ways, and a covenant school will help them.

Will you take a look with me, then, at our special children: what *can* they learn, what *should* they learn in a covenant school?

1. Knowledge of God's Word. This includes Bible history, Bible knowledge, such as the truths of creation, God's dealings with His people, all the way to the story of salvation in Christ, and the way God gives us faith to embrace it. Along with Bible studies goes music: rhythm and singing, so that our children can sing the songs of Zion.

2. Reading. A teacher of special children whom I highly respect

once told me that “almost any handicapped child can learn to read.” I believe that. Reading is not a goal in itself, but in a covenant school the class will be busy with the mechanics and with comprehension so that, if possible, they can read by themselves for enjoyment. That, however, is not the most important reason for learning reading. The most important reason is that it is a tool for living along with the life of the church: these children will be able to read Bible stories, and the Bible, if they have the ability; they will learn an expanded spiritual vocabulary so they can understand some of the terms in the preaching—faith, grace, repentance; they will be able to join their fellow saints in singing praise by following in the *Psalter* during services; they can read and learn Bible texts to keep in their hearts as their own treasures. That is our calling before God in teaching reading.

3. Math, or Numbers. Many parents and educators have told me their special children cannot comprehend math concepts. One educator went so far as to say that *no* mentally impaired child can go beyond simple math concepts. Have you ever thought of asking why? I have. I wonder whether the Lord made it that way because they will never need those in-depth math concepts. These children will never enter the complicated math life, the computer-mind, of the world. Their work will always be simple, simple enough to allow them to use their few basic concepts. Instead, God let these children advance in skills — verbal and reading — that will help and enhance their spiritual lives.

4. Nature study, or simple science. A covenant school will teach these children as much as they can understand about the wonders of God’s world, always from the point of view of the marvels of His creation. It will also teach them to live happily with as much knowledge as they can assimilate in His world.

5. Christian living. This could probably be better termed Christian responsibility in the sphere of their social life. They will learn how to get along with their fellow Christians in love, learn what God’s law has to say about it, and learn to know that they cannot live as God’s children in this world without His abundant grace.

In all these areas, each special child will advance and comprehend according to his own capacity. Most of them understand and function at simple levels all their lives. Our *calling* in a covenant school is to work in all these areas, to keep them reaching, and never say, “That’s all he can learn. That’s all he can do.”

That is our calling. But you may ask, “*Why* is that our calling? What is the *purpose* of educating them in a covenant school? Obviously, the answer is not to get them a job in the busy marketplace. The

most these children will do is get a simple manual job. Others will not be able to take even that responsibility. They will live along, learn the simple details of life, help with simple tasks, and be as useful and occupied and as happy as they can be, according to their capabilities.

It is much more important to train them to live along with the church, participate in worship, to have fellowship with God's people and have God's people have fellowship with them. In this area, I think many of us fail. We do not seek fellowship with these special children. Talk to them, people of God, smile at them, communicate with them. We miss a great joy when we don't. And the role of the covenant school in all this will be to help the parents to train them in obedience to their baptismal vows to live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. There is nothing more important.

Finally, what does all this mean concretely for our proposed school for handicapped children? Why is it so necessary? Why is it so necessary soon? What will we do there?

1. We will teach academics as much as possible: reading, language skills, math, and general knowledge, adapting to the needs and capabilities at the level of each child's ability.

2. We will teach them to get along with fellow students, teachers, playmates; and we will teach them the basis: to love God first, and their neighbor as themselves. And the covenant teachers must needs be examples of love, patience, and diligence, always seeking the good of the child.

3. We will teach them to live along in God's world: to try to stay well — and to give physical exercises and therapy if they need it; to learn to improve the use of their hands with arts and crafts; and to learn the wonders of creation in various ways, according to their capacities.

4. We will try to fill them with the main goal of a covenant school for special children, a goal which is stated in the last part of the second question asked of the parents at baptism: to teach them the true and perfect doctrine of salvation.

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