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# The Privilege and Challenge of Educating the Lord's Special Children<sup>1</sup> (Part 1 of 2)

By C. Van Dam

My qualifications for speaking on this topic tonight are not the life experiences the Lord has put on my path. From that perspective I am unqualified. And yet when the Board of Assistance to the Special Child Committee approached me in their very polite and hard to resist manner, I quickly acceded to their request to address you tonight because I firmly believe that the Word of our God has something to say about the privilege and challenge of educating the special children that the Lord has placed in our midst. And when the Lord speaks to us, He gives direction, encouragement and admonition. His Word is a light on our path, also when our path includes being a parent or teacher of such a special child or children. And so I speak to you as a student of the Word of God. My purpose is to remind ourselves tonight of some basic biblical truths as they impact on our topic tonight.

*In Scripture, a teacher can be called a father.*

I propose that we go about it as follows. First, let us consider the place and purpose of parent and teacher. Secondly, let us consider what specific goals flow forth from that purpose and how these goals can be reached. Finally, there will be a short conclusion.<sup>2</sup>

## The place of the parent and teacher

There is, biblically speaking, an enormous area of commonality between being a parent and a teacher.

This is evident, e.g., from the fact that in Scripture a teacher can be called a father. Teachers are called fathers.<sup>3</sup> The term "father" is a term of honour.<sup>4</sup> Especially when the term "father" is used of a teacher (as Elisha calls Elijah), there are special overtones. If the teacher is the "father," the student is his "son."

Think, e.g., of how Paul, a student of Gamaliel of the Pharisees, calls himself "son of the Pharisees" (Acts 23:6). Also think of Psalm 34:11 where David speaks as teacher as he says: "Come, O sons, listen to me, and I will teach you the fear of the LORD."

This description of the relationship between teacher and student as that of father and son cannot but remind us of the primary place that the home has in the education of the youth of the covenant. For example, we read in Proverbs 1:8, "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and reject not your mother's teaching." Here there is a clear reference to the home. But, elsewhere in Proverbs when the "son" is addressed, it is generally agreed that he is often addressed by his teacher-father, the wise man who instructs him, rather than by his natural father.<sup>5</sup> The fact that some of the passages referred to are open to debate, whether it is indeed the natural father or the teacher-father who is speaking, indicates that in a sense the distinction between the two types of fathers is somewhat blurred in Proverbs. Indeed, the use of such "homely" terminology as "father-son" underlines the fact that the character of education in the home and outside the home was to be essentially the same. The home takes precedence. That is where the educa-

tion process starts and that is the place where any Christian education outside the home gets reinforced. And so we can be here together this evening as parents and teachers with a common task, also over against those with special needs.

What is that task? As you know, parents were exhorted to teach the covenant ways of the LORD to their children so that the LORD would bless them. This is a well-known biblical truth and we do not need to go into all that now.<sup>6</sup>

*As parents and as teacher-parents we have an awesome, life-giving task.*

What is of more immediate concern here is to see how relevant this task is to the very identity that we as parents and as teacher-parents have. The point is this. As parents we have given our children life – biological life. That is a tremendous thing. We were God's instruments to give the gift of life to a new person, our child – one person at a time. As parents, that is only the beginning for we live in a fallen world. We also have the task to give our children life in the fullest sense, the life that is more than biological existence, the life in fellowship with God! That is why parents (both father and mother) are exhorted to direct and mould their children in the ways of the LORD (Prov 1:8; 31:1) so that the children could live before God and live eternally under his blessing.

Life, however, lived in fullness before the LORD also implies very practically speaking to be able to make a living. The religious and the practical go together! The parents therefore also had to be very realistic and teach their offspring to make a living. So father and mother in the home were to see to it that their children could *live*, that is, make a living before God and receive the covenant blessing of a rich life, yes of eternal life.

If this general goal is the bottom line for the significance of being a parent, then the implications of a teacher who is the school parent of the children entrusted to him or her are considerable. The teacher-parents have to reinforce and support the work of the natural parents in imparting life to the children; that is, they were to help them to make a living before God and to receive the covenant blessing of the LORD so that they could live eternally.

There is in Scripture (specifically Proverbs) no contrast between the practical and the religious. Teachers are to be instruments for life, in its fullness. To ignore the instruction of a teacher therefore has devastating results. Proverbs 5:13-14 says: "I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors. I was on the point of utter ruin in the assembled congregation [i.e. Israel]."

As parents and as teacher-parents we have an awesome, life-giving task, with a view to equipping for life service in this world and with a view to eternal life. This life-giving aspect is really the bottom line, the parent's and the teacher's ultimate *raison d'être*.

With this as background, we can now better understand the nature of the goals and the way to these goals. This brings us to the second part of this introduction.

(To be continued).

<sup>1</sup>An introduction given in various churches in Southern Ontario during the past year or two. The occasion for the speech was an invitation from the Board of ASC Committee (ASC = Assistance to the Special Child). The ASC Committee is a committee of the League of Canadian Reformed School Societies and functions as a type of think-tank which also creates awareness for and functions in the interests of the handicapped child. This speech has benefited from the input of some members of this Board as well as from Henry and Analies Homan of Attercliffe.

<sup>2</sup>We will not deal with the biblical data on the handicapped. There is very little that directly speaks of this "modern" category of the handicapped. See, e.g., "What Scriptures say about Mental Retardation," the report of a (Christian Reformed Church) Synodical Committee on mental retardation with emphasis on the severely and profoundly retarded individuals, as circulated by Bethesda (about 1980). The report as I have it in my files is undated. The following can be noted: *God is concerned about and is protector of the handicapped and he wants his people to share this concern.* For example, God commands his people: "Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God, I am the LORD" (Lev 19:14; cf. Deut 27:18). The reference to the fear of God, reminds one that God does see and hear and he will come to the protection of those with disabilities who have been taken advantage of (cf. Ps 146:8; Zeph 3:19). Although handicapped individuals could not serve as priests (Lev 21:17-23), yet, the handicapped were not excluded from worship nor from fellowship with the community (cf. Lev 21:22-23; 2 Sam 9:1-8).

<sup>3</sup>Also see my "Wisdom, Knowledge and Teaching" in C. Van Dam, *Fathers and Mothers at Home and at School* (Reformed Guardian, New Series No. 8, 2000) on which the present speech is built and my "A School of Sons and Daughters," *Clarion*, 24:9 (1975) 2-4.

<sup>4</sup>It is used, e.g., of a Levite in Judges 17:10; 18:19, of Saul by David in 1 Samuel 24:11 and of Elijah by Elisha in 2 Kings 2:12.

<sup>5</sup>So, e.g., 1:2ff; 3:1,11,21; 4:10,20; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1; 19:27; 23:15; 24:21,23. See, e.g., W. H. Gispen, *Spreuken* (Korte Verklaring; 1952) I, 25 and H. Haag in G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds., *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, II (1975), 152.

<sup>6</sup>For example, in Genesis 18:19 the LORD speaks of Abraham as follows: "... I have chosen him that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." In the well-known passage Deuteronomy 6:4-9, parents are exhorted to teach the will of the LORD to their children. Similarly, Psalm 78:5-7 tells us: He [the LORD] established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments." (Cf. also the Form for the Baptism of Infants and the promises that the parents make.)



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# The Privilege and Challenge of Educating the Lord's Special Children<sup>1</sup> (Part 2 of 2)

By C. Van Dam

*In the first installment, we saw that parents and teachers ("school parents") have an awesome, life-giving task with a view to equipping for life service and with a view to eternal life. We now consider the nature of the goals of educating and how these goals are to be reached.*

## The goals and how they are to be reached

The key goal of what to impart to your child or to your students is wisdom in the biblical sense. What is that wisdom? In the context of our topic we could put it this way: having wisdom enables one to function in life so that the purpose for which God put that person on earth can be realized. That purpose will be different for a normal child from that of a handicapped child or a special needs child. Each has received different gifts and God has different expectations of each. But each has received a task here in this life and they must be equipped for that task by the parents and by the teachers who continue the role of the parents in this respect. Equipping them for the task means imparting wisdom to them.

Wisdom is all-comprehensive in Scripture – encompassing both technical skills as well as insight and understanding in general (cf. e.g., Exod 28:1-3, Prov 1:2-6), but it starts with knowing God. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov 1:7a, Ps 111:10) or elsewhere: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 9:10).

It is obvious then that imparting to our children, also those with special needs and challenges, a sense of the fear of God, the love of God, and the knowledge of God is absolutely essen-

tial if we are to give life in its fullness to our children. Only by knowing God will their life have a firm basis and orientation point. Only then will it have direction, purpose, joy and fulfillment!

How is all this to be accomplished? It will come as no surprise that effort is needed for teaching and learning this wisdom that is rooted in the fear of God. It is not automatic (cf. Prov 4:1-7). Indeed, the Old Testament (Hebrew) word for "instruction" (*mûs\_r*; Prov 1:2, 3) also means "training" and has the idea of discipline. The instruction is therefore a teaching accompanied by correction and reproof, a teaching presented with authority. We need to be firm with our children, also the special needs children and set clear perimeters for their behaviour and clear expectations.

*Each has received different gifts and God has different expectations of each.*

Such firm discipline and training would be in vain, however, if it was not a discipline that was life-producing. As parents and school "fathers (and mothers)," our "sons and daughters" must sense our deep love for them. In a sense it is love that will determine so much. The love for God and our neighbour (in this case our children) will define our approach to discipline, how we execute it and what expectations we set for it. This love really is a critical ingredient. And is that not encouraging? After all, the Lord our God equips and will equip us as Christians with this

love. If we feel inadequate here, God will provide an answer to our prayers. Love for God and our neighbour is basic to the Christian life and love will communicate in many ways, also with respect to our special needs children and their requirements.

When the firm discipline and training (*mûs\_r*) that is necessary is applied to those with special needs – within the realm of what can be expected of them – such firm discipline will be conducive for equipping the special needs child for the task God has given them.<sup>2</sup> Put differently, the pattern of authority and teaching will not be stifling, but life-producing; not discouraging but encouraging for the students. In disciplining, something of the great love of God must be present, both in the home and at the school. Teachers too are fathers . . . , mothers . . . . Discipline must be life-producing.

Such firm instruction of our children in love must have as constant goal to give our special children a very clear sense of their identity as a child, not only of father and mother, but also of God, the Father in heaven. They need to know that there is a God in heaven who is for real and who has come down and claimed him or her as his very own. A God who has attached his name and promises to their life. A God who will go through life with them, moment by moment. Now all this can seem very daunting and difficult. How can we adequately tell that God so loved the world that He gave his only Son to die for sinners so that we may have life? Can the special needs child understand this?

Let us take a step back. Can we understand it? Do we not need to take all this on faith ourselves, without being

able to understand the incomprehensible love of God in Christ? Often a child, also those who are challenged and have special needs, will simply accept things because mother or father or teacher has said so. Their faith can be so strong that they put adults to shame. In this way the Lord also equips the special needs children to know the comfort of the gospel and so also meet their own need for a clearly defined sense of identity and belonging. They may know for a certainty that they do not just belong to an earthly father and mother, but to God himself and his family!

*In disciplining, something of the great love of God must be present.*

As God's representatives, as parents and teacher-parents, we will do everything possible to underline that basic message by the way we deal with those special children entrusted to us. Because they belong, we also need to spend time with them, to talk to them, try to understand them and communicate to them. They need to know that we are there for them – within reason, as other children have a right to the same expectations.

We also need to teach them to remember the basic truths of Scripture and the basic truths which they need to function in life here on earth. Memory work and routine is extremely important. Children love routine and memorizing. We should not become discouraged if our challenged and special needs child takes a long time to learn something. They learn very little on their own and we must keep at it. For example, teach them a simple Psalm by singing it with him or her over and over. At set times such as before going to bed, but also during the day. They will eventually learn.<sup>3</sup> As a pastor, I once came to a congregation which had special needs children and was asked to remember them from time to time by giving the Psalm they are learning in worship services. Of course, I gladly complied. That gave those children such a thrill! They belong. The worship service is for them too! And so patient, constant instruction to get the truths across, in song or otherwise is very important. It is disciplined instruction and such a routine and memory work gives them a sense of specialness and identity.<sup>4</sup>

Of course we also need to teach by our own example and attitude and our body language. Our words must match our actions and life style. Indeed our example may be the only way we can teach those special needs children who have great difficulty learning concepts. Such children will be able to imitate godly lifestyle and attitude. It is very important that they learn to be friendly and polite and not nasty to others, for they will receive similar treatment. They must also learn from their parents to watch their tongue and be careful what flies from the lips. It is very difficult to undo bad habits. More examples could be mentioned.<sup>5</sup>

There is another important element here that needs emphasis. As redeemed children of God, one of the things the Lord wants his people to experience is joy – the joy of redemption, the exhilaration of forgiveness, the joy of belonging to Jesus Christ. Negatively that means that we must not burden the special needs child with expectations and obligations that are beyond their capacity. It is important to know and stay within their limits. Otherwise, such a child will feel like a failure and there will be little of the joy left or experienced.

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Positively, recognizing the key element of joy means that we can reinforce and engender the feeling of happiness and joy in the life of the special needs children by reminding them of their special status as God's children within this world. There are different ways of doing that. If our challenged or special needs child has done something wrong and can be held responsible, he or she should be told and shown the seriousness of their guilt. But then also, the joy of forgiveness can be passed on and how Christ makes this possible. There should be many ways to reinforce this basic message and give joy to the child.

Another way, to encourage and promote the joy of life is to integrate them as much as possible in family life. Special needs children should be treated as normally as possible, as part of the family or class at school. Then they can participate with a sense of belonging in the joys of singing and family fun and outings. That is also good for the rest of

the family, for the other children should not think that only the special brother or sister gets the attention. All belong to the family! And so integration as much as possible is important. Having the special needs children share the joy can mean having these special children who of necessity may have to go to a public school participate in a simple way in part of a Christmas or Easter program of our own Christian school. They belong, also with the other children of the church.

Having them share the joy also means that when our challenged child struggles with questions around his or her own condition we take time to listen and respond with the gospel. For instance, such a child may ask, if God is all-powerful and good, why did He make me the way I am?<sup>6</sup> I would like to be like the ones who are not handicapped and limited the way I am? Also school teachers who deal with special needs individuals must be prepared to offer a listening ear and give biblical emotional support for those with these type of questions. After all, home and school are in this together and also school teachers are "parents" in a real way to their student "children." We should not be afraid to confide that we too do not understand everything, but that like little children, we too have to learn to trust in God who does work all things for our well being and salvation (Rom 8). Our God is not mean and nasty. He is our Father (cf. Matt 7:9-11) and seeks our good! Also by our life example, they should see that we leave our problems and difficulties with the Lord and live in faith and trust. That will be of great encouragement to those with special needs and to all our children.

*We can reinforce and engender joy in the life of the special needs children by reminding them of their special status as God's children.*

The life wisdom that God wants us to pass on to our children also includes the practical everyday work world. Where possible our special needs children should learn social and technical skills and be integrated as much as possible in family life, in the classrooms of the schools and in the workplaces of

society. Much progress has been made in this area and it is to be lauded.

### Conclusion: the sum of the matter

The Lord our God has a purpose in placing each one of us in this world at this particular time of history. He has given us all a task in his service. As parents and as parent-teachers we have the task to give life to the children entrusted to us, also those challenged and with special needs. To that end wisdom needs to be passed on by disciplined instruction and example. The heart of what we are to impart to those in our care is a sense of the fear and love of God. That is essential for enjoying life in its fullness.

*Since God is the one who has entrusted our children to us, we can also be sure that he equips us to do the task he expects of us.*

Since God is the one who has entrusted our children to us, we can also be sure that He equips us to do the task He expects of us. This does not mean it will always be easy. We will need to go to the throne of grace often. But it does mean that God is behind us all the way and will strengthen and encourage us in this task. We can count on Him! According to the testimony of those who have special needs children, one way he encourages us is by the openness, honesty, thankfulness and happiness often exhibited by such children.<sup>7</sup>

Our key task is to make sure that those with special needs and challenges also feel included in the family and church of God. They belong and they too must know the joy of redemption.

Knowing this identity and joy means that those with special needs will be able to do their life calling and task. Ultimately that life calling and task is to praise God and thank Him for his goodness. We are here on earth to glorify our heavenly Father (cf. 1 Cor 10:31). Also our special needs children have that task and the Father equips them for that obligation, also through the work of the natural and teaching parents.<sup>8</sup> We need never doubt that. Even the most severely handicapped or challenged child is used by God to

bring glory to Him. After all such a child will leave a tremendous mark on our life and give our life a joy and a meaning we never knew could exist.

A handicapped or special needs child, even one that is able to respond little, can change our life in a way a normal child never can. Parents of such a child have told me that a special needs child can drive us closer and closer to the Lord than we would otherwise never have been. That makes life rich and beautiful beyond measure. The heartaches, sleepless nights and worries about our special child can result in a walk with God that is the envy of our brothers and sisters in the faith. And let's face it, if the purpose of life is to glorify God, could anything more beautiful than a close walk with God be imagined? We will daily thank God for the special child He has put in our life path for such a child has made life so unbelievably rich, a richness surpassing the treasures of this world. And when we tire and grow weary, He will sustain us by his grace, just as He does with the so-called "normal" children who can also cause us much anguish and worries. If we only go to Him, He will show us the way, also with our special children. May you all experience his nearness and grace as you deal with the challenges God has put on your path. It's a challenge that also includes

the very rich privilege of being an instrument of God for good for eternity!

<sup>1</sup>An introduction given in various churches in Southern Ontario during the past year or two. The occasion for the speech was an invitation from the Board of ASC Committee (ASC = Assistance to the Special Child). The ASC Committee is a committee of the League of Canadian Reformed School Societies and functions as a type of think-tank which also creates awareness for and functions in the interests of the handicapped child. This speech has benefited from the input of some members of this Board as well as from Henry and Analies Homan of Attercliffe.

<sup>2</sup>On the necessity of discipline, think, e.g., of Prov 19:18, "Discipline your son while there is hope. Do not set your heart on his destruction."

<sup>3</sup>See "'Anchor': How do we tell it to our Children?", *Clarion* 32:24 (1983) 513. See also, J.C. Evink-Bult, "Gezinsbegeleiding van gehandicapt" *Dienst* 27:1 (1979) 12.

<sup>4</sup>See also for other aspects of telling our children about the gospel, such as the main events of the history of salvation bit by bit, H. Zijp, "How do we tell it to our Children - 2," *Clarion* 33:6 (1984) 128.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., to share toys with friends, to think of others and not just oneself, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. R. Gunnink, "They Shall Always be Among Us," *Clarion* 32:23 (1983) 492.

<sup>7</sup>See W. Pouwelse, "Special Children," *Clarion* 35:7 (1986) 101.

<sup>8</sup>See on this also E. vander Weij, "Fully Capable Work Force - Valuable Employees," *Clarion* 32:6 (1983) 125-126. 

