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The Church's Relation and Duty to her Children

Sermon preached by the Moderator, Rev. W. D. Armstrong, M.A., D.D. at the opening of the Thirty-second General Assembly in First Presbyterian Church, London, Ont., Wednesday Evening, 6th June, 1906.

Isaiah 65: 23.—"They are the seed of the blessed of the Lord and their offspring with them."

Mal. 2: 15.—"That he might have a godly seed."

You can easily understand that it has been a matter of some solicitude to your retiring Moderator to decide on a suitable theme to bring before you at the opening of this Assembly.

Many great and mighty themes pressed upon his mind for recognition, but that which seemed to him most vital, urgent and timely is the Church's relation to and duty towards her children.

This subject has been so strongly borne in on my mind that it seems to be the one specially given me.

A simple theme indeed, and worn—but fundamental and living.

From my text, and indeed from the whole tone of the Old Testament, I discern the desire of God—the hunger of His heart—for a godly seed—a people holy to the Lord and "their offspring with them."

I hear our Lord declare concerning the children "Of such is the kingdom of heaven." I hear among His final exhortations the command "Feed my lambs," and I feel that He is laying primal stress on religious education as a means to preserve a godly seed.

I take the word of the great apostle to parents concerning their children, "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," and from this trend of all scripture I feel sure of the emphasis put by the Divine mind upon the training and nurture of her children by the Church.

The Home.

It is natural, as indicated in our text, that the primal stress should be laid on the home and home life. Without pure and holy homes it fares ill with both Church and State and all the phases and relations of society.

The questions sent down by our Committee on Church Life and Work may have been difficult to answer, but they were searching and helpful when read to the whole congregation.

Now the question that presses on my mind painfully is this, "Is our Church dealing seriously and earnestly with home life? Has domestic religion its due place? Are the children, even in our Christian homes, being trained as a godly seed or are they being trained largely for the world? Is the Church as helpful to parents as it should be, realizing the supreme importance of their duties and responsibilities?"

Parents who lead their children in the way of Life are helped to walk therein themselves.

Parents who realize the importance of their own faith, their own example, will walk carefully and humbly with God for their children's sake.

The parents who really believe that their children are a godly seed will have them nurtured for God and for His service. They will insist that religion shall have its supreme place in their homes and will not willingly see it disparaged in the school or anywhere else.

Parents who really accept the word of Christ, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven," find in it an inspiration to train

their children for heaven. They pray and plan and teach that they may keep their feet in the way to heaven, and no deeper joy will come to them in heaven than the thought Our loved children are with us.

I do not like to make rash statements, but I do not think our Church is really awake to the importance of this duty, adequately realizes its profound meaning, or is intelligently helpful to parents in regard to its discharge.

I fear that the value of a truly godly parentage is not appreciated by the Church as it should be, that the unequalled advantages enjoyed by parents in putting their children right with God and keeping them there are overlooked in favor of spasmodic and transient influences.

That the influence of home atmosphere, as a means through which the Spirit of God may operate, is not esteemed as it should be. We call for pure air. It is essential to health. It will cure disease. We dread to have our children breathe tainted or poisonous atmosphere. What if, in our homes, they breathe a moral atmosphere, tainted with worldliness, vanity, selfishness, avarice, censoriousness and pride when they should breathe the free and generous—the holy and loving air of a Christian spirit.

It would be a strange thing, indeed, if Christian parents were not visited with intense and holy yearning for the salvation of their children, whom they love as life and whose happiness they desire above all things.

It would be a strange thing, too, if earnest Christians, who are not parents, should not see it to be a high privilege and duty of love to win and train the children for Christ, whether children of godly parents or children who have no parents—or worse than none.

The very thought that a sweet child should grow up anything but good should be a grief to any Christian who loves Christ and knows His mind, and should be like a heart-stab to a Christian father or mother.

What happiness to the parents when their children grow up good and useful men and women, but what a heartbreak, what bitter misery if they grow up worldly, godless, wicked or profligate!

So God has given every vantage ground to parents in family life to train their children into goodness.

What advantage could Christian parents desire in the education and training of their children that God has not provided?

Would you have the soul when it is innocent before evil has developed or erroneous prejudices preoccupied it? You have it.

Would you have the soul when it is plastic, when it is delicately susceptible to any impression you desire to make upon it? You have it.

Would you have the soul when it is credulous, when it is ready fully and frankly to trust you and your teaching? You have it.

Would you have the soul that you may more carefully train it—not occasionally, but constantly—not for hours or days, but for years? God has so arranged it.

Do you desire suitable facilities and instrumentalities to enable you to bring the

best impressions to bear upon that soul? In the Bible you have them.

Would you have the co-operation of Him who made the soul—the Father of our spirits? You are assured of this. The Holy Spirit works with you.

What a vast vantage ground in the fact that it takes many years for a child to grow into manhood!

It would be a great gain to have the children of our Church trained to an intelligent interest in the sacraments.

What a gain it would be to our Church to have much fuller instruction given them on the significance of the ordinance of baptism.

It is to be feared that many children and even older people look upon it merely as the giving of a name to the baby.

How different if parents looked upon it as a solemn public dedication and surrender of their children to God; as the public recognition of their children as standing with themselves within the pale of the visible Church; as the solemn taking hold of God and His covenant for themselves and for their children.

Do we not believe that the little ones are in the Kingdom? Do we not believe that dying in infancy, children are saved by the grace of God in Christ Jesus?

Is that grace withdrawn should they live? And do we not believe that the grace of God will work with a mother's prayers, with the religious instruction at the family altar, with the spiritual atmosphere of a Christian home, with the faithful instruction of Christian teachers just as well as with the public preaching on the Sabbath or the exhortations of the evangelist?

Let me not be misunderstood. I believe in the work of the evangelist. I believe it is a good thing to hold special meetings and adopt special means whereby Christians may be aroused and the unconverted and the careless may be reached and won for Christ. But let our ideal be the nurturing of the children of the Church in the Lord, in Christian homes and through the ordinary means of grace.

But I have perhaps gone a little way from the thought I wish to emphasize, which is this, that we should seek to make our children feel from the beginning that they are "holy," that they belong to God, and that the claims of God are upon them.

The story is told of Earl Cairns that when a little boy on his way to school he heard a voice from heaven saying "God claims you." When he went home he told his mother "God claims me." The meaning was made clear to him. He afterwards reached the highest position in the gift of the British Crown as Lord Chancellor of England, but during a long, honorable and useful life he recognized this claim of God upon him as supreme.

Early and continuously let this claim be pressed, "You belong to God"; "you are His for salvation"; "you are His for service."

"Behold all souls are mine. As the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine."—Ez. 18:4.

If we press thus the claims of God upon our children one result will be, that we shall recognize his claim upon ourselves, upon our time, our service, our property.

Another result will be that we shall be ready to surrender our children to God. Lord they are thine; the most precious treasures Thou hast given us, but they are Thine. Thine to be made holy. Thine to be made useful. Thine as missionaries, as ministers or as mechanics.

To be what Thou wouldst have them be, to do what Thou wouldst have them do, to go where Thou wouldst have them go.

The School.

The primary responsibility for the education and training of the children must rest upon the parents, but the greater part of the work is done in the schools.