



Behold what manner of love!

Every school has a basis and foundation and some sort of statement of purpose. These standards for education influence the activity of a Board and of an Education Committee and what is put into a student or parent handbook. That is especially true within the setting of our Christian schools. The children come to learn and you as teachers stand at the front of the classroom to teach them to respond in thankfulness to what the Lord has given in his mercy.

The underpinnings of so much of what we do within the school setting can be summed up with the words that are the theme for this convention, *“Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed (lavished) on us that we should be called children of God.”* These are beautiful words. Every time the door to a classroom is opened and the children file in and sit down in their desks to do their school work we have evidence of God’s covenant faithfulness and abiding love. *“Behold, what manner of love!”* The love of God in calling us children is the driving force determining the content of the education, the attitude of the children on the playground, the communication between parents and teachers, and the support the school receives from others who do not have children in the school system. Reformed and covenant education directs children to God the Father and teaches them to walk in obedience to Him in all areas of life.

Within the field of education there are plenty of scenarios that may dismay, discourage, or disappoint us. Students are not always that easy to handle. Parents can be unreasonable in their expectations. Some of our colleagues can at times irritate and annoy us. Yet if we think of teaching in the context of the Father’s love, that might give us the boost we need to keep us from losing heart or throwing in the towel! Something good is going on – also within our schools! *“Behold what manner of love...!”* God the Father is gathering together his children; Jesus is preparing an eternal home for your students and for you as teachers.

All of us are in school – the school of life. As children of God, we long for the final bell – when the trumpet will sound and we will go home. Christian teachers are themselves students. Together with the parents and the students in your classroom, you are children who are under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit.

The privilege of being children

“Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children.” In 1 John 3 the Apostle searches for words in an attempt to describe God’s love. He is overawed by the manifestation of the Father’s love and he wants that reaction to filter through to all of us. To be called children of the living God is more wonderful than you can imagine and deeper than you can fathom. In the Greek language, the phrase translated *“what manner”* refers to something foreign, something out of this world. What manner of love: the love of God is not ordinary. It is foreign to the human race. It belongs to a different dimension. This love is not arbitrary or whimsical (like human love tends to be). It does not discriminate on the basis of what we are like – whether we are desirable, attractive, or loveable. It is solely rooted in grace – undeserved favour.

See what manner of love has come into our earthly existence! The Almighty, the holy Father, approaches an unclean people, a rebellious and contrary people, and He says, *“I claim you! You are my son and I take you to be my daughter. I establish a relationship – a covenant of love with you.”* John’s first epistle was written against the false teachings of an early form of Gnosticism. Those of you who teach church history know that Gnosticism was a major movement within the early Christian church. These people taught that only those with superior knowledge and a special bond with God could call themselves children of God. They suggested that you should not be

presumptuous or assuming and consider yourself to be a child of God until you reached a certain level of spirituality. Imagine the tension that would have created within the congregation – some members would always be made to feel inferior because they did not make the grade. John, however, will have none of it, and without hesitation refutes these false teachers. For the church is the household of God, the home where the children of God dwell. As children of the Lord, you are given brothers and sisters throughout the world! School children are part of the family of God. As a believer I do not stand on my own, and I may not stand on my own, because the Father has placed me in his family. Together with all the other members of the family I am called and obliged by the Lord to behold his love.

It certainly changes our perspective if we pause for a moment each day and say these words:

“Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us (me as a teacher, and they as students) that we should be called children of God – literally, that we should be brought forth by God.”

For we are speaking about something that is nothing short of a miracle. What greater love can you find than this: the holy majestic God takes us into his family and calls us his sons and daughters! The language of God’s love is a language unknown in this earthly realm. The eternal love of God is so profound and so wonderful that it goes beyond anything in this world; it is beyond human experience. The Lord in infinite love and mercy takes outcasts, rebels, and enemies and brings them into his family and gives them the family name, status, privileges, blessings, and the family inheritance!

When the Father determines to enter a relationship with us we receive the same privileges that Jesus Christ receives being the eternal Son of the Father. What awesome and extraordinary love! It is amazing and breathtaking because in order for us to be children and to be heirs to everlasting life, Jesus had to go to the cross. The natural Son of God had to shed his blood for this. The Lord was under no obligation to save us from sin. He did not owe it to us. It is a great thing to have our sins forgiven through the shedding of Christ’s blood, but it is even greater to be received and accepted into God’s family. The Lord was under even less obligation to grant us the privilege of being his children. He could have left us in our sins or simply called us slaves, but He calls us children. *“Behold, what manner of love! Behold ... and bless the Lord oh my soul!”*

The love of God in calling us children is the strength of the church and of our schools! Every day you and I are called to be what we are. It is a great privilege to be part of the covenant and to have a father/child relationship with the most high God. There are also implications for how we – teachers as well as students – act in response.

The all-encompassing implications

The more we learn of the revelation of Christ, the more we see the all-encompassing implications of being children of God. The following verses of 1 John 3 take us to those implications, *“Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall see Him as He is.”*

The certainty that we are children gives meaning to life for the present. Life has value and meaning! The time we spend educating covenant children is not without purpose. We live today as children with the perspective of what is to come. A young child knows he is a child but he doesn’t know what will happen during his life. Similarly we know who we are: we are children of God, but we do not know what exactly the future holds. We are not all-knowing; we have our limitations, but that does not mean we do not know anything. We know that when Jesus Christ appears we will be changed. The children of God will be released from sin completely and we will be made wholly suited for glory. John says that we will be like Christ. Our outward appearance will change in that we will receive a body that is no longer subject to lack of energy, disease, death, and decay. Our inner disposition will change in that we will no longer sin or be bogged down by the effects of sin. Here our life is fleeting like the grasses. Yet, as children of the Lord we can live in the assurance of eternal life. Furthermore, we will not only be Christlike, but we will see Him in his glory. We will have full communion with Him and our eyes will not be clouded by the sins that today cloud our

vision. That vision makes us long for the day we will be in glory and so the children of the Father join the Spirit and pray, *“Come, Lord Jesus! Maranatha.”*

Being children of the Father gives us a grand perspective for the future and shapes the philosophy of Christian education. What we will be is the perfection of what we are – children of God. What that all entails is not known to us but our status as children and the hope this establishes in our hearts has implications for today. Verse 3, *“And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”* To purify is to lead a life worthy of the Lord and according to his commandments. Nothing may jeopardize this! Christian teachers and Christian students are to walk together in purity and holiness. The social activities and the environment of a school are to reflect a desire to serve the Creator. Students are to see in their teachers examples of godliness – an enthusiasm for the Lord and a heart of love and compassion for each student.

“See what manner of love!” The implications are all-encompassing. Let me list but a few things for your consideration – matters that are quite tightly connected to one another and can be summarized by the word “orientation.”

First of all, fundamental and foundational to Christian education is orientation – attachment and relational orientation (note: the idea of attachment and orientation and some of the ideas that follow are the outworking of what Gordon Neufeld writes about in his book, *Hold on to Your kids*, 2004). Teachers and students have a mutual attachment and orientation – we are in a relationship with our heavenly Father. Students and teachers are part of the same family. We are covenant children who have the same Father, who are adopted by grace.

As Christian teachers you need to have your bearings straight and be oriented in the right direction – upward – looking to the Father. Behold! Our orientation is relational. Being called covenant children serves as the compass point that will help us keep our bearings and prevent us from becoming lost. What children fear more than anything else is getting lost. To them being lost is losing contact with their compass point (Neufeld, p. 18-20). In the triangle of home, school, and church, both parents and teachers are to keep the children close to the compass point. Their orientation is to be toward their heavenly Father.

When you read through the gospels you will see that Jesus is constantly aware of his relationship with his Father. His attachment and relational orientation is toward his Father. That relationship controls his living, thinking, and manner of teaching his disciples. Jesus always considers, *“What does my Father want?”* This upward orientation ought to be reflected in how our boys and girls communicate with their peers. If our boys and girls and our teenagers remember the attitude of Jesus toward his Father and their Father, that will change how they speak with their teacher and how they treat each other and it will keep them from bowing to unhealthy pressure or relationships.

- Our schools are more than academic centres of learning. In our efforts to establish a solid Reformed curriculum and teaching methods let us not forget this is done in the context of relationships. Children in Reformed schools are to be fed material as they mature in their relationship toward God and their fellow students. The teaching environment should be one of security – a security that is in the Father’s love.
- Secondly, teaching within the setting of a Reformed and Christian school is so much more than a job. It is not merely a set of skills to be followed along the lines recommended by experts that qualify you as a Reformed teacher, but Reformed education is first and foremost a relationship that is oriented toward the Father. The secret to teaching, just as it is with parenting, is not merely in what a teacher *does* but rather what the teacher *is* to a student (Neufeld, p.6).
- Third, in the covenant setting in which we have learned and continue to stand in awe of the Father’s love we are to see connectedness with our students as a high priority. Covenant is more than a theory, a doctrine, or a word to be bandied around. It is to be practised and lived. Think of the damage that is done to the students if they feel detached from us or if we keep them at arm’s length. The importance of attachment relationship that flows out of the love God has lavished upon us underlines the need for teachers to be more than academics in the

classroom. When the children feel that they are genuinely loved they will respond. You have developed a positive environment for learning that cannot be matched by any other school.

- In the fourth place, if we are not achieving the results we want, we beg our students to behave, we bribe, reward, punish, or we lose our cool. We hear ourselves address them in tones that seem harsh even to us. We blame ourselves for failing at the task of teaching or our students for being unruly. We look at outside influences that are distracting them or we complain about lack of support coming from the parents. I would suggest, however, that you as teachers will be greatly helped and facilitated if you recognize a student's misbehaviour most likely means he has lost his bearings and orientation. When a child is rude, disrespectful, hostile, or refusing to listen it is a *behavioural* problem that is rooted in a *relational* problem – where is he at in his relationship to the Lord, his parents, his teachers? Children are more than their behaviour. If relationship needs are not met properly, that has disastrous results for a child's emotional, social, and intellectual development. We need to pray for healthy homes and parent/child relationships that build upon the love of the Father.
- Fifth, if children do not feel attachment with their parents and with their teachers they will fill the void by looking to their peers. But alas, that attachment often distracts them from beholding what manner of love the Father has bestowed on them. Peers become their orientation and they become bored and listless when away from them. They take their cues from them about their language and bearing, their expressions and demeanour, their attitudes and appearance. They balk at the slightest request and respond to requests of interest as if they are being intruded upon. It is enough for them to just be with each other, even if they are completely off the map. They take comfort in each other even when adults (parents and teachers) see that they are heading in the wrong direction or in no direction at all (Neufeld, p.21). Students' attachment with peers prevents them from being oriented toward the love of the Father and from forming more meaningful attachments based on our common relationship of being children of the Father. Loyalty to peers can bring a child into direct conflict with loyalty to teachers and parents as they follow the orders of their peers and stand up for them (p.31). The children are coming to school mainly to socialize with their friends rather than to learn and to be stimulated to think. That often has consequences for the rest of their lives. Their orientation remains their friends. Church is seen as little more than an opportunity to socialize and such individuals are controlled by what others think, rather than doing all to the glory of God.
- Sixth, as teachers we can express love for the children we teach in so many ways – by our body language, the tone of our voice, or manner in which we discipline those who have stepped out of bounds. If you ask a child "how was your day?" their response will be in terms of attachment. You do not hear them say, "School was just great! The teacher did such a wonderful job teaching the lesson. I am so glad that he is right on schedule." But they will say, "The day was great! The teacher was in such a good mood." "The day was not so great! The teacher just seemed so angry, agitated, and grumpy." A child will thrive in an environment where they feel they are loved as a child of God.
- Seventh, every student is your brother and sister. When you have to break up an argument, or when you have to speak to a child that has caused you considerable grief, he is not a bad kid, or a difficult or miserable child. Think of your students as children of the Father. Your student may be absolutely frustrating, but he is still a child of the Father.

Take up your task!

Dear teachers, you have a tremendous task which keeps you busy. The dedication you demonstrate is something that is not always fully appreciated or conveyed to you. What will you take back with you into the classroom after this confession? It is my prayer that at the very least you take back with you five words: behold what manner of love!

It's Monday morning ... the bell rings. Behold what manner of love that all those children who stream into the classroom are called children of God! Behold what manner of love! May that give you the patience to help the child with learning disabilities, to discipline in love the student who has stepped out of line, to build good relationships with each other as staff members – a desire to work

with each other rather than compete against each other. Behold what manner of love! May that weed out every tendency toward favouritism. Behold what manner of love! May that cause you to look to the Lord for your strength and may it cause the children in your class to experience warmth and compassion – that you are more than their teacher – you are their brother or sister. Think of what you have received in Christ. You yourself are first a child and then a teacher. You are not a child because you made the grade, but because you were bought through grace. What goes on in the church of Christ, in covenant homes, and in covenant schools is so amazing. The privileges that we receive in this life are so great the world with all its technological advancement is not able to grasp it. The love the Lord has lavished upon us today is a foretaste of what is to come. Today we teach and we learn; we live in relationships and we admire the works of God. But we realize all too well that everything is done with many sins and shortcomings. Today we are encouraged by the message of God's Word, *"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us to call us children."*

Luxuriating in what He has lavished upon us, we also know the best is yet to come! The day is coming when our orientations will always be correct and we will not spoil or wreck anything. At the final bell of world history we will see Christ as He is. We will sit at the feet of our great Teacher. The crowning joy of our relationship as children of God, of our labours here, is that as we look upward we also look ahead to the time when the children of God will behold the Lamb of God and will forever exclaim, "Behold what manner of love!"

P Feenstra

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