

KOINONIA KONNECTION

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A HEART TO HEART ABOUT THE WORK OF THE SESSION

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." (Heb. 13:17)

I would like to take some time, in this issue of our Koinonia Konnection, to talk to you about the emotional challenges of being a church elder. My purpose is not to write in such a fashion as to address the challenges of our Session only. Rather, all which I will have to say applies equally to the experiences of any Session in any local congregation. My inspiration for writing this article has been certain experiences which our Session has endured in the past few months. These experiences have inspired me to try to encourage and enlighten the sensitivities of our congregation regarding the arduous and draining labor of an elder.

Now, allow me to make clear, I don't perceive there to be any specific problem with our congregation in regard to the way the elders are treated. Quite the contrary, I have been nothing but pleased and proud to note the gentle and submissive spirit of our people in response to their elders' difficult task. Yet, one can never know when sin will take hold of our hearts and drive us to do things that we might never expect. The best protection against sin is realizing just how near it is to us.

I don't intend to let you into all the details of our work. Much which confronts the elder in his task is best kept private, as it concerns the personal

struggles of others who would prefer their private information remain just that...private. Rather, I would like to share with you certain personal impressions regarding the burden (and yes, I call it a burden) of being an elder. My goal, in light of the above passage, is to direct the reader toward a greater degree of sensitivity as to the difficulty and emotional strain of the elder's work. This is not a "feel sorry for the elders" article. But rather, should the reader take what will be said to heart, he will make the work of the elder a joy, and not a matter of "groaning" as our passage puts it.

And so, allow me simply to list a few matters which I perceive, from personal experience, to be significant "sorrows of the eldership:"

1. *Ignorance as to what the elder is.* This, as I perceive it, is a foundational problem. All those other issues which I will mention stem ultimately from this one issue: that many people don't recognize the elder as appointed by Christ. Our above passage asks for obedience to our elders. Why? Because elders haven't taken the office upon themselves, but are literally and truly appointed by Jesus Christ as our overseers. Their authority, quite literally, comes from heaven. Yet, how often we neglect to think about that fact! Maybe we're afraid to think of its implications? If we confess that our elders are appointed by Jesus, we can't ignore them, avoid them, or be selective about which elder we'll choose to respect. To confess that elders are appointed by Christ is to put our prideful nature in quite a pickle!

2. *Peoples' tendency toward secretiveness.* Former generations talked about how people

"don't like to have their dirty laundry hung out of doors." In other words, nobody likes their private business, particularly the ugly stuff, spread around. This is not necessarily a bad principle. I don't believe it to be a mark of piety for Christians to go around talking to complete strangers about their most private sins. Some people do that, and I'm not sure that is either spiritual or particularly healthy for those involved. But secretiveness has no place in the relationship which exists between Christ and those church members in their charge. "That's none of your business," is never something an elder should have to hear when he's talking to a parishioner about spiritual concerns. Jesus has given you your elders to guide you spiritually and pray for your spiritual burdens. This means that openness and frankness are the rule of the day.

3. *The modern hatred of authority.* Along with general ignorance as to the nature of the elder's office, this issue is foundational in regard to the causes of grief for Christ's under-shepherds. Culturally, we presently sail upon the sociological waves caused by the liberation movement of the Sixties (of course, it's ironic that the very generation which celebrated unqualified liberty as a generational watch-word is the very one which, at present, slowly strangles the life from personal freedom on an international level). Radical individualism, freedom from constraint, distrust of authority...these elements form the mortar with which the present cultural milieu is built. It cannot be easily overstated how radically this new attitude has affected the attempts of Christ's under-shepherds to do their duty to God and His people. Often, attempts by Christ's elders to do their duty amidst the flock are met with apathy, malcontent, even insult. Efforts to bring God's Word to bare by well-meaning elders can be labeled as hateful, invasive, even abusive!

4. *Peoples' failure to respond reverently to the elders' counsel.* This source of discouragement is closely connected with the issue covered

under #1. I often get the impression at home visitations and in other situations that people receive the counsel of their elders as merely one opinion among many. The elders' word is merely put alongside the opinions of friends, family traditions, personal taste, and other sources. In fact, it often seems like the elders' counsel ranks lower for many people than other sources. Now, there's no doubt that elders can make mistakes. And there's no doubt that their counsel can be wrong. But rarely do I see the kind of intense, thoughtful consideration which ought to be present when a man who is appointed by Christ as His representative speaks. It's surely possible that he's wrong in what he's saying, but we had better listen very respectfully and carefully regardless.

5. *A tangible lack of affection.* One last burden that many elders needlessly bear is a serious lack of open affection demonstrated toward them by the people of their congregation. Unfortunately, elders often carry a stigma of inaccessibility which seems to come with the office. For Pastors, it's even worse. Together with man's natural coldness toward authority, this may result in alienation, loneliness, even depression. God has made human beings so that affirmation, affection, and demonstrations of appreciation are all "terminally" necessary. I use the word "terminal" because whether or not an elder or Pastor feels your warmth for him may have impact on the very depths of his emotional life. Even kings need a friend. Your elder is not a king, but he very much needs to know that you love and appreciate him. Sadly, such expressions of congregational warmth are all too rare...especially in our Reformed camp.

And so, what can you do in response to what I've said? Consider well the words of our text printed above. What are the major verbs of command for you to follow? I count three. The first two probably stand out more than the third.

But I note a third verb, or a "verbal phrase," rather. We are told, "let them do this with joy and not with groaning." What does this tell us? That we must add to our labor of being "obeyers" and "submitters" the holy duty of being "joy-bringers" and "groan-removers" for our elders. Making our elders happy in their work is part of serving Christ, and part of our submission to the elders He has given us. In other words, being a true Christian involves making the labor of our elders a task of delight rather than a horror.

When is the last time you expressed thanks and appreciation to your elders? When was the last time you said, "I'm thankful for you," or "I really appreciate you," or even "Our family really loves you, and loves the work that you do." Do your

elders know that you love them? Are you warm toward them, or cold?

And how about a question which is even more significant: How do you respond to your elders when they endeavor to practice spiritual care over you? Are you standoffish? Are you terse? Are you defensive? How easy do you make it for them to do their job when they are likely nervous enough asking you the questions that they do?

Remember, your elders are just men. As men, they need just as much love, acceptance, and encouragement as you do. Keep that in mind at your next elders' visitation. Your behavior may make the difference between joy and groaning for your elders.

-by Edward W. Ludt



MISSION SPOTLIGHT

MISSION RUSSIA INTERNATIONAL

WHO WE ARE

Mission Russia International is a church planting ministry actively operating in Russia and the former Soviet Union since 1995. The ministry operates out of Moscow and is mainly supported by South African churches and individuals from various countries. Mission Russia's overseer is Hugo van Niekerk, who lives in Moscow with his wife Rika and their three children. Today the Mission Russia Team consists of more than 20 South African missionaries, operating in different regions of Russia.

THE URGENT NEED IN RUSSIA

Today less than 1% of the Russian population are evangelical Christians. Statistics confirm the spiritual condition of the nation: 2 out of every 3 marriages end in divorce. Two million orphans in Russia and more than 300,000 street children in Moscow testify of a nation in desperate need of the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

After 1,000 years of institutional religion and 70 years of Communism, Russia is at the crossroads in its history. Now is the time to see the

church in Russia established, shining forth the light of the gospel to this great nation's 142 million people living in more than 30,000 cities, towns and villages.

The need in Moscow, the capital of Russia, is overwhelming. Today more than 14 million people, including up to 3 million Muslims from Central Asia, are living in one of the most extreme, fast-paced cities in the world. With only 3 churches bigger than 1,000 members and possibly 30 churches bigger than 100 members there is a most urgent need for planting a city-transforming church that will bring in multitudes of people.

THE ANSWER

The ultimate answer to any problem in the world is the church of Jesus Christ. Strong, healthy churches in Moscow and across Russia and the former Soviet Union will bring transformation of communities and release heaven's resources to save and heal a hurt and wounded nation. That is why our focus for 10 years has been church planting and caring for existing churches.

We have seen the blessing of God on church planting in Russia and former Soviet Union nations, always working with local churches in those regions. In 2005 though, we entered into a new phase of church planting, with the birth of the Moscow church and Church Planting Centre, called the Union of Christians Church.

The Moscow church and Church Planting Centre (Union of Christians Church) will serve as a launching pad for the birthing of a new church planting movement across Russia, former Soviet Union nations and any nation in the world where Russians are found. We are calling Christians in South Africa and all over the world to stand with us in seeing a movement released that will eventually multiply into thousands of churches across the face of Russia and abroad.

May God bless you tremendously as you stand with us in faith to see the kingdom of God come in Russia and the former Soviet Union, and to see His will be done there as it is in heaven (Mat. 6:10).

FURTHER INFORMATION FROM MISSION RUSSIA

A new door has been opened for us to bring Jesus Christ to the world wide Russian-speaking community. Two of our team members - names withheld for obvious purposes - have recently returned from a very successful trip to China.

A key contact has been made with a Russian pastor in Beijing. Our goal is to start working with Russian students in China - I was pleasantly surprised to learn that there are many of them!

Our Russian language Christian television is broadcast through the Hotbird 6 and Express 2AM satellites, which both include China in their coverage. This means that with our guidance, Russian speaking people in China will soon be able to have 24-hour Christian television in their homes.

The Christian television will then point people to our church's Information Platform (website) - which soon will have teachings and sermons in Russian in video, audio and written format. As people then start responding to us via e-mail and instant messaging, we can start building relationships with those people, leading them to the Lord and discipling them.

Notice the three main stages of evangelism above: (1) Sowing, (2) Contact (3) Friendship.

From there we can take one of two routes: either plant a new church or work with an existing church. Time will tell what we will do.

God will use the Russian Church to bring the gospel to the nations. The blessing will outdo the curse of the past. The light of Christ will shine from Moscow and the multitudes will rejoice.

"Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; but the Lord will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you." (Is. 60:1&2)

Dear friends,

How wonderful, loving, Almighty is our God! God is blessing our church in Moscow. People are saved and the sick healed. Thank you for your prayers of faith. The Lord is answering them to the glory of His name.

Continue to unite with us in praying for new home churches to be formed. Remember that our home churches are moving together in unity, forming one movement with one purpose.

We now have two missionaries stationed in Siberia, pray that the Lord will give them special grace for the unique challenges facing them there: extreme cold and vast distances. One region of Siberia - the Krasnoyarsk Region - is as big as France. Temperatures can go down to - 60 degrees Celsius (in the Far East of Russia the record stands at -72.)

Continue praying for Carol and her team as they are laying the foundation for the Fire of the Bride trans siberian prophetic train trip in the summer of next year.

*In Christ,
Hugo*

BOOKS IN REVIEW

This book is a study of Psalm 73 originally presented by the author in a series of Sunday morning sermons. He deals with two questions which have perplexed many Christians throughout the ages. Why do the godly suffer? Why do the ungodly seem to prosper? The psalmist is troubled because he only looks at things with the physical eye. It is only when he begins to look beyond the present circumstances by faith to God that he is able to put these perplexing questions in the proper perspective. It is only when one begins to think spiritually and draws near to God that he realizes the end of the ungodly while the Lord is always the rock of security and blessing for the believer. The author stresses the importance of "keeping near to God. When we fail to do so, we are like a ship at sea that loses sight of the North star, or whose compass fails. If we lose our bearings, we must not be surprised at the consequences."

Faith on Trial
by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones
Baker Book House
125 pages

-submitted by Cope Jonkman

YOUTH'S CORNER *A PLEASING SACRIFICE* **GENESIS 4:1-8**

Cain and Abel both brought offerings to the Lord. God rejected Cain's offering, but He accepted Abel's. The difference was that Abel made a faith offering and God was pleased with him. Find the missing number in each group to break the code to find out what offering Abel made to God.

$2, 4, _, 8 = H$

$4, 8, _, 16 = P$

$1, _, 5, 7 = K$

$1, _, 3, 4 = B$

$11, 22, _, 44 = F$

$0, _, 10, 15 = L$

$5, 10, 15, _ = O$

$5, 6, _, 8 = T$

$1, _, 15, 22 = A$

$3, 6, _, 12 = C$

$8, _, 14, 17 = G$

$11, _, 15, 17 = M$

$20, _, 24, 26 = S$

$7, _, 13, 16 = I$

$7, _, 21, 28 = N$

$9, _, 27, 36 = E$

$3, _, 5, 6 = R$

$5, 10, _, 20 = U$

8 2 18 5

2 4 20 15 11 6 7

33 8 7

12 20 4 7 10 20 14 22

33 4 20 13

22 20 13 18

20 33 7 6 18

33 10 4 22 7 2 20 4 14

20 33 6 10 22

33 5 20 9 3

(from Genesis 4:4)

FAMILIES IN FOCUS

THE DUTIES OF PARENTS - PART 6



XIII. TRAIN THEM REMEMBERING CONTINUALLY HOW GOD TRAINS HIS CHILDREN.

The Bible tells us that God has an elect people, a family in this world. All poor sinners who have been convinced of sin, and fled to Jesus for peace, make up that family. All of us who really believe on Christ for salvation are its members.

Now God the Father is ever training the members of this family for their everlasting abode with Him in heaven. He acts as a husbandman pruning his vines, that they may bear more fruit. He knows the character of each of us, our besetting sins, our weaknesses, our peculiar infirmities, our special wants. He knows our works and where we dwell, who are our companions in life, and what are our trials, what our temptations, and what are our privileges. He knows all these things, and is ever ordering all for our good. He allots to each of us, in His providence, the very things we need, in order to bear the most fruit, as much of sunshine as we can stand, and as much of rain, as much of bitter things as we can bear, and as much of sweet. Reader, if you would train your children wisely, mark well how God the Father trains His. He doeth all things well; the plan which He adopts must be right.

See, then, how many things there are which God withholds from His children. Few could be found, I suspect, among them who have not had desires which He has never been pleased to fulfill. There has often been some one thing they wanted to attain, and yet there has always been some barrier to prevent attainment. It has been just as if God was placing it above our reach, and saying, "This is not good for you; this must not be." Moses desired exceedingly to cross over Jordan, and see the goodly land of promise; but you will remember his desire was never granted.

See, too, how often God leads His people by ways which seem dark and mysterious to our

eyes. We cannot see the meaning of all His dealings with us; we cannot see the reasonableness of the path in which our feet are treading. Sometimes so many trials have assailed us, so many difficulties encompassed us, that we have not been able to discover the needs-be of it all. It has been just as if our Father was taking us by the hand into a dark place and saying, "Ask no questions, but follow Me." There was a direct road from Egypt to Canaan, yet Israel was not led into it; but round, through the wilderness. And this seemed hard at the time. "The soul of the people," we are told, "was much discouraged because of the way" (Exod. xiii. 17; Num. xxi. 4).

See, also, how often God chastens His people with trial and affliction. He sends them crosses and disappointments; He lays them low with sickness; He strips them of property and friends; He changes them from one position to another; He visits them with things most hard to flesh and blood; and some of us have well-nigh fainted under the burdens laid upon us. We have felt pressed beyond strength, and have been almost ready to murmur at the hand which chastened us. Paul the Apostle had a thorn in the flesh appointed him, some bitter bodily trial, no doubt, though we know not exactly what it was. But this we know, he besought the Lord thrice that it might be removed; yet it was not taken away (2 Cor. xii. 8, 9).

Now, reader, notwithstanding all these things, did you ever hear of a single child of God who thought his Father did not treat him wisely? No, I am sure you never did. God's children would always tell you, in the long run, it was a blessed thing they did not have their own way, and that God had done far better for them than they could have done for themselves. Yes! And they could tell you, too, that God's dealings had provided more happiness for them than they

ever would have obtained themselves, and that His way, however dark at times, was the way of pleasantness and the path of peace.

I ask you to lay to heart the lesson which God's dealings with His people is meant to teach you. Fear not to withhold from your child anything you think will do him harm, whatever his own wishes may be. This is God's plan.

Hesitate not to lay on him commands, of which he may not at present see the wisdom, and to guide him in ways which may not now seem reasonable to his mind. This is God's plan.

Shrink not from chastising and correcting him whenever you see his soul's health requires it, however painful it may be to your feelings; and remember medicines for the mind must not be rejected because they are bitter. This is God's plan.

And be not afraid, above all, that such a plan of training will make your child unhappy. I warn you against this delusion. Depend on it, there is no surer road to unhappiness than always having our own way. To have our wills checked and denied is a blessed thing for us; it makes us value enjoyments when they come. To be indulged perpetually is the way to be made selfish; and selfish people and spoiled children, believe me, are seldom happy. Reader, be not wiser than God; train your children as He trains His.

XIV. TRAIN THEM REMEMBERING CONTINUALLY THE INFLUENCE; OF YOUR OWN EXAMPLE.

Instruction, and advice, and commands will profit little, unless they are backed up by the pattern of your own life. Your children will never believe you are in earnest, and really wish them to obey you, so long as your actions contradict your counsel. Archbishop Tillotson made a wise remark when he said, "To give children good instruction, and a bad example, is but beckoning to them with the head to show them the way to heaven, while we take them by the hand and lead them in the way to hell."

We little know the force and power of example. No one of us can live to himself in this world; we are always influencing those around us, in one way or another, either for good or for evil, either for God or for sin. They see our ways, they mark our conduct, they observe our behaviour, and what they see us practise, that they may fairly suppose we think right. And never, I believe, does example tell so powerfully as it does in the case of parents and children.

Fathers and mothers, do not forget that children learn more by the eye than they do by the ear. No school will make such deep marks on character as home. The best of schoolmasters will not imprint on their minds as much as they will pick up at your fireside. Imitation is a far stronger principle with children than memory. What they see has a much stronger effect on their minds than what they are told.

Take care, then, what you do before a child. It is a true proverb, "Who sins before a child, sins double." Strive rather to be a living epistle of Christ, such as your families can read, and that plainly too. Be an example of reverence for the Word of God, reverence in prayer, reverence for means of grace, reverence for the Lord's day. Be an example in words, in temper, in diligence, in temperance, in faith, in charity, in kindness, in humility. Think not your children will practise what they do not see you do. You are their model picture, and they will copy what you are. Your reasoning and your lecturing, your wise commands and your good advice; all this they may not understand, but they can understand your life.

Children are very quick observers; very quick in seeing through some kinds of hypocrisy, very quick in finding out what you really think and feel, very quick in adopting all your ways and opinions. You will often find as the father is, so is the son.

Remember the word that the conqueror Caesar always used to his soldiers in a battle. He did not say "Go forward," but "Come." So it must be

with you in training your children. They will seldom learn habits which they see you despise, or walk in paths in which you do not walk yourself. He that preaches to his children what he does not practise, is working a work that never goes forward. It is like the fabled web of Penelope of old, who wove all day, and unwove all night. Even so, the parent who tries to train without setting a good example is building with one hand, and pulling down with the other.

XV. TRAIN THEM, REMEMBERING CONTINUALLY THE POWER OF SIN.

I name this shortly, in order to guard you against unscriptural expectations. You must not expect to find your children's minds a sheet of pure white paper, and to have no trouble if you only use right means. I warn you plainly you will find no such thing. It is painful to see how much corruption and evil there is in a young child's heart, and how soon it begins to bear fruit. Violent tempers, self-will, pride, envy, sullenness, passion, idleness, selfishness, deceit, cunning, falsehood, hypocrisy, a terrible aptness to learn what is bad, a painful slowness to learn what is good, a readiness to pretend anything in order to gain their own ends—all these things, or some of them,

you must be prepared to see, even in your own flesh and blood. In little ways they will creep out at a very early age; it is almost startling to observe how naturally they seem to spring up. Children require no schooling to learn to sin.

But you must not be discouraged and cast down by what you see. You must not think it a strange and unusual thing—that their little hearts are so full of sin. It is the only portion which our father Adam left us; it is that fallen nature with which we come into the world; it is that inheritance which belongs to us all. Let it rather make you more diligent in using every means which seem most likely, by God's blessing, to counteract the mischief. Let it make you more and more careful, so far as in you lies, to keep your children out of the way of temptation.

Never listen to those who tell you your children are good. Think rather that their hearts are always inflammable as tinder. At their very best, they only need a spark to set their corruptions on fire. Parents are seldom too cautious. Remember the natural depravity of your children, and take care.

-by J.C. Ryle (to be continued)

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