Providing a good education

Text: Titus 3:3-5

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Scriptures: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Ezekiel 36:22-27; John 3:1-8; Titus 3:1-7

**Songs Chosen:** O God beyond all praising, [SttL] 51, 119:41-48; 440, 345

Series: Heidelberg Catechism (LD27)

Theme: The Apostle Paul outlines the core truths of the gospel of salvation to Titus as he describes the total depravity of natural mankind, the merciful redemption of God in saving people apart from works and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit

Proposition: We must clearly teach the essential components of the gospel to our covenant children.

**Introduction**

Being a parent, or someone else who cares for the development of children involves many responsibilities, including providing a good education for life. What are the most important subjects to cover in the schooling of children? The New Zealand Curriculum identifies five key competencies: Thinking; Using language, symbols, and texts; Managing self; Relating to others; Participating and contributing.

There’s a set of three core ‘competencies’ with a much longer history than the 5 identified in our National School Curriculum These ‘core competencies’ first appeared in a magazine in 1818, but they are alluded to by the 5th century theologian Augustine who identified reading, writing and ‘ciphering’ as key elements of a good education. Many of us today know these areas as the ‘the three Rs’: Reading, writing and arithmetic.

The three ‘R’s are also referred by the 18th century preacher and hymn writer John C Ryland who said: “*No sermon is of any value, or likely to be useful, which has not the three Rs in it: ruin by the fall, redemption by Christ, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit*”.

In the third of the three ‘pastoral epistles, the letters in Scripture which Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus, we learn that Titus has a teaching ministry in Crete where he was left by Paul (1:5). His subject was the truth of the Bible. Paul exhorts him to ‘teach what accords with sound doctrine’ (Tit 2:1) In our text this morning Paul conveys a teaching curriculum to Titus for his ministry in the church in the form of what we can describe as three ‘Rs’: ruin, redemption and regeneration. These form the structure of our three-point sermon this morning.

1. **Ruin (v3)**

Most parents have needed to deal with damage inflicted by their children on others and on property at some time. Punching, biting, kicking other children at home, at school, even at church! Indelible marker pen ‘impressionistic artworks’ on furniture and walls, carelessly smashed windows, wilfully broken toys belonging to a sibling or friend. I’m sure all of us can think of many examples of the destruction which children can cause unless they are taught to respect others and not to intentionally damage property.

In our text, Paul writes about himself, Titus, the congregation in 1st century Crete and all the rest of mankind descended from Adam (that covers all human beings apart from Jesus Christ), saying: “*For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another”.* Here Paul describes foolish destructive behaviour; disobedience, selfishness and broken relationships characterised by hatred.

At what age do these damaging behaviours and attitudes begin? Is there an ‘age of innocence’ during which our children are entirely good, or at least ‘neutral’, having not yet had any opportunity to damage others or the world around them? The answer, from the Word of God, who only ever speaks the truth, is that that there is no age of innocence. We know this because sometimes very young children die, some within the first 9 months of their lives when they have not yet left the womb. This is sadly so common that most people accept it as just a normal part of the natural order, but there was no death before our first ancestors disobeyed the Maker. At that time this world was very good.

Death is the penalty for sin, as God’s Word makes very clear e.g. “*For the wages of sin is death*” (Rom 6:23). Young children die because the curse of God is against all humanity descended from Adam and they are under that curse. We all inherit guilt and pollution from our common ancestor Adam. The Bible puts it this way: “*... just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*” (Rom 5:12). We all inherit the guilt of Adam’s sin when we are conceived – before we have had any opportunity to sin. We all inherit a polluted nature when we are conceived – we are sinners by nature before we first sin.

There is no ‘age of innocence’ before we first rebel against God. There is no period of our lives, however young, at which stage we are exempt from the penalty of death. We start life as a single-celled zygote. This zygote, this person, is already ruined by the effects of Adam’s sin, already under the curse of death, already separated from God, already spiritually dead though physically alive. From the earliest moment of our lives we are ruined beings.

A theological term for this ruin is ‘total depravity’. This does not mean that we are all naturally as bad as we could possibly be, but that every part of us is enslaved by sin. David, when painfully aware of the ruin which his ruined nature had caused, wrote: “*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me*”. (Ps 51:5) As a person develops from their single-celled zygote form in the womb becoming an embryo, a foetus, and infant, a toddler, a child and then an adult they progressively exhibit the effects of their inner nature, some of which Paul identities in our text: foolishness, disobedience, selfishness, malice, envy and hatred.

When our children are very young our instruction is mainly behaviour-based: “don’t do that, do this”. As they continue to develop, we are able to more and more explain why ruinous behaviours and attitudes are wrong and what causes them. We can explain what sin really is: Teaching aids for this include the Westminster Shorter Catechism – A14: “*Sin is disobeying or not conforming to God's law in any way*”. Sin is first and foremost a rebellion against God Himself. Our sin ruins us, those with whom we come into contact, and the whole world around us.

As our children grow, we must provide them with a good education, not merely explaining what to do and say and what attitudes are right, but that the standard we show them is the same standard that we also are called to live to. We must teach our children not only the reason why they fail again and again to reach God’s good standard, but that this is also the reason why we as adults and teachers also fail. This good and necessary teaching then provides the background against which we can present the rest of the gospel – the central component of any good education. Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Redemption (v4)**

As our children grow older it is wise to start teaching them how money works as a ‘medium of exchange’. We earn money as payment for work which we do in our jobs and then we can spend that cash to purchase goods and services. The second ‘R’ in the curriculum for ‘bringing up children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord’ is Redemption; it is a spiritual equivalent of a physical transaction involving money. The meaning of the word ‘redemption’ is the buying back of something or somebody for example: Today, a company listed on the stock exchange may buy back, or redeem, shares from their shareholders by paying them money in return for the shares. In the Roman Empire, at the time when Paul wrote this letter to Titus, a slave could be ‘bought back’ through the process of someone paying a ransom in order to set them free. **Sometimes wicked people kidnap someone and then demand a ‘ransom’ payment before they will hand the person back.**

**We find the word ‘ransom’ used in Scripture to describe redemption where those who are held prisoners by their own ruinous sin do not demand release, but are set free because of the goodness and kindness of God who pays for their freedom through the death of His own Son.** “*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Matt 20.28). Redemption is what Paul writes to Titus about in v4-5 *“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy”.*

Spiritual redemption is the ‘buying back’ of people who are enslaved in their natural condition of ruin; utterly unable to help themselves. This is entirely a work of God - as a result of his goodness and kindness (the Greek word from which we get the term ‘philanthropy’ – a desire to promote the wellbeing of others). It is a work which He does in order to save people – to set them free from their ruin, from a fallen nature which is ‘totally depraved’. It is a work of mercy towards those underserving of God’s loving kindness/philanthropy. It is a work towards which people contribute absolutely nothing. As Paul writes to Titus ‘not because of works done by us in righteousness’.

**Perhaps young children can accept this redemption - where the price has been paid by someone else - more readily than those who are older. Young children are used to receiving gifts with ‘no strings attached’ – no obligations to repay or to work for what has been given. Ordinarily in many countries, they are provided with all that they need from their parents without having to pay for food, clothing, electricity, insurance etc.**

**However, as they grow, they are taught to contribute to the running of the household, usually by helping with some chores. Later as earning adults, they are often asked by their parents to contribute financially by way of weekly board whilst they continue to live at home. Often it is only when children leave home as young adults that they fully realise just how high the cost of living is.**

**As we develop, we learn that it is right for us to ‘pay our way’; in so far as we are able. The Scriptures wisely warn against laziness e.g.** “*If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat*” (2 Thess 3:10). **A good education must therefore certainly include teaching about being willing to work and not being an unnecessary financial burden to others, but more importantly a good education must clearly teach that God alone has paid all the costs of ‘buying people back’ people for Himself, that is redeeming or ransoming them.**

**This is a simple lesson which can be quite difficult to learn, because it is so contrary to what we experience in most of life as adults. There was an** instant cake mix developed by a company that proved to be a big flop. The instructions said all you had to do was add water and bake. The company couldn’t understand why it didn’t sell—until their research discovered that the buying public felt uneasy about a mix that required only water. Apparently, people thought it was just too easy and therefore didn’t trust the product. In response the company altered the formula and changed the directions to call for adding an egg to the mix in addition to the water. This idea worked and sales jumped dramatically.

Likewise, salvation seems too easy for some people to believe. They feel that there is something more they must do, something they must add to God’s “recipe” for salvation. They think they must perform good works to gain God’s favour and earn eternal life. But the Bible is clear—we are saved, “*not by works done by us in righteousness, but according to His mercy*”. However, unlike the cake-mix manufacturer, God has not changed His “formula” to make salvation more marketable.

The gospel we proclaim must be free of works and it should include, not only a clear explanation of the ruin which sin has caused to all of Adam’s descendants and the redemption in which Christ has ransomed people by paying the price with his own death in their place, The gospel which we teach must also include the need for regeneration…which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **Regeneration**

I have an adorable photograph on my cell phone of my granddaughter Alexandra, who just celebrated her first birthday. She is covered in soap suds in the bath. It’s a particularly cute picture, but the scene is very familiar to me as a parent of many offspring. Very young children (like Alex) need to be washed. As they grow older they need to be taught to wash themselves – that’s part of a good education.

The third ‘R’ of a good education in the works and ways of the Lord is ‘regeneration’. The Apostle Paul refers to this in our text in v5b: *“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the* ***washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit****”.* Regeneration is a renewal, a transformation, a radical change. Regeneration here is a kind of washing – not performed by people, but by God in the person of the Holy Spirit.

We heard about this earlier in the prophesy of coming restoration which the Lord spoke through His servant Ezekiel: “*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules*”. (Eze 36:25-27)

This regeneration by the Holy Spirit is the ‘new birth’ or ‘birth from above’ which Jesus needed to explain to Nicodemus – the leading spiritual educator of Israel at that time. Christ said: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" Salvation, God’s work of mercifully dealing with the sin problem of people like you and me, is brought about firstly through the “*washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*”. This new birth happens because the goodness and loving-kindness of God appeared in human history in the person of Jesus Christ.

The shed blood of Jesus is applied to people like you and me when the Holy Spirit acts to give spiritual life, thereby our sins are washed away, and we are spiritually clean in an instant. The Bible expresses this purification in these words “*the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin*” (1 John 1:7). Jesus Christ is the Saviour whose work of redeeming those ruined by sin is applied to individual sinners through the Holy Spirit’s regeneration of spiritually dead people thereby making them alive.

Regeneration radically changes the nature of a person and can occur in someone’s life at any stage from conception until just before death. This renewal is seen through the attitudes, behaviour and works of a person who exhibits a pattern in their life of turning away from sin and turning to trust in Christ for forgiveness, direction and purpose in life. It is very clear from our text that ‘the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit’ refers to the inward transformation of the heart of a person from being spiritually dead (that is separated from God) to being spiritually alive (that is being in relationship with God).

What is not so clear is the connection between the washing of regeneration by the Holy Spirit and baptism. As a result, different views are held by Bible scholars, students and Christians with a Berean approach of ‘examining the Scriptures’ who desire to know what the Bible says. For example, the Protestant Reformer John Calvin wrote about this text in Titus 3:5: “*I have no doubt that there is at least an allusion here to baptism and I have no objection to the explanation of the whole passage in terms of baptism; not that salvation is obtained in the external symbol of water, but because baptism seals to us the salvation obtained by Christ*”.

Regeneration is connected to baptism in Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 27 where three separate questions are asked about baptism. The catechism reflects the teaching of Scripture in clearly stating that the outward washing with water in baptism does not itself wash away sins. Therefore, a person may be baptised (at any age) and not be saved. The outward washing of baptism is no guarantee of an inward regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Rather, baptism is a visible sign which teaches us that “*the blood and Spirit of Christ wash away our sins just as water washes away dirt from our bodies*”.

Most, if not all, protestant Christians would agree with teaching about baptism as distinct from the view as expressed in the Roman Catholic catechism (ref. www.vatican.va/archive) that: “*Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God*” and “*This sacrament is also called "the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit," for it signifies and* ***actually brings*** *about the birth of water and the Spirit without which no one "can enter the kingdom of God*."

This is what is called the ‘presumptive regeneration view’ because it presumes or assumes that those who have been baptised (either as infants or adults or at any age) have actually been born again by the Spirit. This is not the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism and it is not the teaching of Reformed churches.

However, we do believe that “Infants as well as adults are in God’s covenant and are his people. They, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith”. Baptism then signifies and confirms God’s promise to be the God of his people and he makes this promise to believing parents and their children. We see this in both the Old and New Testaments e.g.

“*And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you*” (Gen 17:7);

*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself*." (Acts 2:38-39)

Baptism in the New Testament is very similar to how physical circumcision functioned in Old Testament Israel. It was a sign which distinguished God’s covenant people from others, but was never a guarantee of the salvation of particular individuals. This is very clear from the history of national Israel – many of whom did not trust the Lord with saving faith. It is also explicitly stated by God when he says of two twin brothers who were both circumcised “*I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated*’ (Mal 1:2; Romans 9:13).

Irrespective of whether Paul, when writing to Titus, intended to make a connection between the internal regeneration of those who are saved and the external sacrament of baptism, there is a link. Baptism points to and provides assurance that God does promise to regenerate all those he chooses to save, not by the human ‘work’ of the person performing the baptism, nor by the ‘work’ of the person being baptised, but entirely because of the goodness, kindness and mercy of God.

An essential part of a good education is teaching the need for an internal washing, a supernatural regeneration of the Holy Spirit which radically changes the nature of a person. Baptism is helpful in teaching this truth and, in the case of infants and young children, representing in a visible way that they are part of the covenant community of the church. That they are ‘holy’ (1 Cor 7.14), being set apart by God to receive a good education by being brought up in the ‘disciple and instruction of the Lord’ (Eph 6:4). However, God alone must ‘enable them to respond in faith to the gospel’ (baptism of children of believers form 1).

We cannot save our children, but we can, and must, provide them with a good education which should include 3 key elements: Ruin, Redemption, Regeneration.

May the Lord confirm the works of our hands as we seek to be faithful in providing a good education, not only for our own children but for all who belong to the church, young and older.

AMEN.