



Covenant "Stones of Remembrance"

Points of remembrance or Ebenezer stones, which recall God's mercy and sustaining power (Joshua 4), are important reminders of growing up with the Lord. After all, our God is a communicating God, a God of promises, a covenantal God who has established a sacred, eternal relationship with His called ones, whom He has guaranteed and confirmed by His Sons death on the cross. Sadly in our society children and young people are often at a loss to see God's hand in anything. Growing up in a culture with temporal and fleeting qualities they long to refer to and identify with meaningful points on the timeline of life.

Even in reformed churches we are losing our young people in droves when they graduate from high school because they see no relevance in their communicant vows. In many of our churches the youth group has taken the place of the church; our young people's faith and service is intertwined with the friendships and commitments made there. Their identity as Christians is often seen through the prism of the youth leader and the activities of this separated subgroup of the church. When the young person looks ahead after his youth group experience, he sees little relevance to his "Parents' church."

Becoming an adult in our postmodern society is now related more to secular memory stones or rites of passage such as obtaining a driver's license, graduating from high school, reaching legal drinking age (or attaining some other age-related privilege like legally smoking or seeing an "X" movie with out borrowing someone else's ID) and sometimes even having physical relationships with the opposite sex. Biblically speaking these are all false signs of maturity. None of them demonstrates doing away with "childish things" and becoming a mature member of the household of faith. In this article I would like to explore some things that many of our reformed churches are doing, or could do, to give our young people a true sense of being whole in Christ, approved workmen who do not need to be ashamed.

At a Christian education conference I recently attended, a pastor shared a new tradition his church is instituting. When parents present their child for baptism before God and the congregation, the father is asked if he will offer a prayerful blessing in the child's behalf. What a wonderful memory this would make if someone would write out the father's prayer and frame it with a picture to hang in the baby's room. I am often impressed when I enter a home and see family

pictures displayed on the walls or in albums. These are especially meaningful if the photos show the family doing things together that inspire memories.

We all know the statistics. The millennial or bridger generation is very likely to be the least Christian ever (around 5 percent), fragmented, unsure of what they believe in, longing for permanent relationships (which they never saw growing up), and scared. Scared of everything getting worse, of another divorce, another suicide attempt, another stepfather or stepbrother to become acquainted with, losing another job, or being replaced by another person. How can we give this generation within our reformed churches the memory stones and the rites of passages that mark their maturity to Christian adulthood? Here are some ideas compatible with our worldview.

Prepare the parents

Most parents did not grow up in homes where a covenantal worldview was clearly expressed, let alone lived out. Jonathan Edwards, the great American Presbyterian of our early history, called homes "little churches" where the essence of our Christianity is worked out. He stressed that "family education and [family] order are the chief means of grace. If these fail, all other means are likely to prove ineffective. [However] if these are duly maintained, all means of grace are likely to prosper and be effective."

I believe one of the most enlightening and effective ways to grow our children up in the faith and instill in them lasting faith, bold prayers, and confidence in God's faithful leading, is the family altar. Here is where the rubber meets the road. Here is where the father is a daily, living example of Christ's love. Here is where the priest of the home builds the living stones of faith. Here is where questions can be asked and answers given. If we leave it to the "professionals" on Sunday then our children will quickly conclude that Christianity is a Sunday thing and relegate it to insignificance. But we as parents are pulled in so many directions! How can we ever have family devotions and prayer? Something must give, and it might have to be a small group, sports activity, television, the internet or many other "good" things that are not growing our children up to walk in the footsteps of Christ.

The church must provide models for questioning parents. Fathers must be challenged from the pulpit and mentored by the session. If we want mature, motivated Christian young people then we must have mature, motivated parents. Paying youth leaders to do the work is shortsighted at best. Mature, functioning families are a clear beacon in this fragmented age. The church must be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Challenge our children to grow in grace and knowledge

Christ grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men (and don't forget that he was in "obedience" to his parents), Luke 2:51-52. Timothy (Paul's prodigy), continued in what his mother and grandmother taught him and "from

infancy" knew the holy Scriptures, which were able to make him wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

Some memory stones and rites of passages for our young people can be knowledge of the Scriptures, memorization of the Catechism for Young Children (to help them understand the basics and distinctiveness of their faith), and finally true covenantal training to prepare them for communicant membership in the church. I will expand on that point in the next section.

Do our children know the origin of their names? God places more significance on names than we do. The names He uses for Himself in scripture could be studied for a lifetime. One of the signs of Adams dominion over the animal kingdom was the privilege he was granted in naming the animals. When Zechariah named John the Baptist it was a tremendous event because he chose a name from outside the family. The stories in Scripture abound with the names covenant parents chose for their children. Yet today we do not challenge our children to live up to the biblical, historical, or familial meaning of their names. A child's thorough understanding of the origin, meaning, and challenge of his name can be an exciting stone of remembrance in his life.

Celebrate communicant membership day

This event is different from church to church, yet I have never seen it used in a fashion that would truly grow the child up in Christ. This true, biblical rite of passage is often a perfunctory meeting with the elders and a few minutes at a worship service in which the young person is just one in a crowd. What a great opportunity to build and strengthen covenant families! Here are some suggestions to make this event a springboard to maturity and involvement.

The father would train the child in the basics of the faith (again, if the child has learned the catechism this will be immeasurably easier). The pastor could provide an outline. Both child and parent would greatly benefit. The father and mother would determine when the child is ready to go before the elders. The child would understand that becoming a communicant member involves saying publicly that he knows he is a sinner, knows he needs a Savior, knows that Savior is Christ, and now can serve the church through the grace afforded him by his salvation (sanctification). As part of the communicant training the church and parents could explore the unique gifts their children have that can be used in ministry.

When the day to receive the young communicant into the congregation arrives, the worship service could be modified. (I recommend conducting a separate service if we are really convinced that this should be a special covenant rite of passage) The parents could participate with a covenant blessing for their child. Members of the congregation could tell how they have been blessed by the child. Special words of encouragement could be given to the young adult about how he should serve the Lord with his gifts. The pastor could have a special blessing. A reception could follow the service. A special item of remembrance could be

prepared, such as a record of the parents' and pastor's prayers, a picture of the event, and letters of encouragement and exhortation.

Part of the final preparation to receive the young person into the congregation should be a well-thought out plan for how this child will minister in the church with the unique gifts God has given him. I'm convinced that one of the reasons we lose our young people to the world is that they do not see a place to minister in the church. Teaching, music, missions-there are many places where their talents could be readily used.

Present a courtship ring of purity

Our society has gone sex-mad and our covenant children have been caught up in the madness. One example of this is "recreational dating" in which inappropriate emotional and physical relationships prepare the young person for break-up (and later divorce). Wouldn't it be great if our children's high school friends were praying partners and true friends so they would not have to experience dissolved relationships because of the shame that they committed towards one another?

One way to anchor the child's heart is to present him or her with a covenant courtship ring (or pendant) that pledges that the parents will be involved in choosing a life partner, and that the young person will guard his or her heart (which can be crushed just as savagely by inappropriate emotional relationships as by physical relationships) and purity of body until marriage.

We must stop the tide of moral relativism and immorality in our culture. Parents must raise chaste children, who see purity as a gift for the wedding bed, and enjoy life-long friendships with true sisters and brothers in Christ, unmarred by lies and immoral thought lives. The American way of dating is a minefield of immorality and danger; we must counter it with a Godly commitment to biblical courtship.

Commemorate graduation

A key point in a young person's passage is his graduation from high school. Instead of leaving it to the local school (parochial or government) to decide the most important charge to give our covenant children, why not plan our own Special Day of Remembrance? Here are some ideas.

Arrange for a Christian who has truly impacted the young person's life (relative, pastor, coach, or mentor) to be the main speaker. Have other adults and peers comment and exhort. Let the young person speak a word of thanksgiving to his or her parents, church leaders, other adults, and friends, truly glorifying God by thanking Him for the grace that has led him or her to this place (a true Ebenezer-hither by Thy help I've come). Give gifts that have personalized meanings, not another five-dollar bottle of cologne or perfume. Include special music performed by friends of the graduate, or even by the graduate. There are

many other ways to make this transition a special moment rather than a cookie-cutter imitation of the secular culture.

These are some suggestions for how we can truly impact our covenant children's lives. We must be prepared with a plan for them or the world will supply one that could easily take them down the road to destruction. Our society will not set biblical "rites of passage" for our covenant children. We can do this by integrating home and church into a tradition of hope in the darkness around us.

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