



Special Needs Children – Gifts from God

Prof. Herman Hanko

Note from the Society for Protestant Reformed Special Education: In thankfulness to our heavenly Father for his special children he has given to us and knowing as we read in John 1:3 “All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.” We believe that all our covenant children have been placed on our path for the glory of God, and that it is our calling to view them as part of the body of believers. As the board of the Protestant Reformed Special Education representing the PRSE society, we are thankful for this fruitful and rewarding work that we have been given to do. We pray that you the reader will be encouraged and inspired by this article and if you are not already a member of the PRSE society, that you would consider joining our society for this Kingdom cause.

I have always had an interest in and a special place in my heart for children with special needs. This is probably due to the fact, at least in part, that our family had a special needs sister. She had suffered brain damage at her birth; my mother came very close to death during delivery.

Because my sister had both physical and mental limitations and because there were, at the time of her birth, no organizations or institutions devoted especially to handicapped children, we had to do for her what we could. In many different ways, the responsibility for teaching her as much as possible, living with her and assisting her with things she could not do herself, fell on all the family, but especially on her only sister Elaine.

Part of the difficulty for the whole family was that she was in many respects apparently normal. She did learn to read. She could communicate well with others. She was very generous, almost to a fault. She was physically capable of doing many things that made one conclude she could do much more than she was actually capable of doing. Her problems with doing many things were *chiefly* mental, not physical. More was sometimes expected of her than she was capable of doing.

Yet she had an important God-given role to play in the family, one we did not realize she had until many years later when all the other children were married and had families of their own. My mother died in 1974 and

my father was responsible for keeping the household together and taking care of my sister. He lived to the year 2005 and died at the age of 97. In the last years of his life he was unable to walk; he was deaf and blind; and he was very weak, although he retained his mental faculties.

One event that my father dreaded greatly was the need to go to a special care facility. My sister made that move unnecessary. She could prepare meals, do the laundry, keep the rooms in which they lived sufficiently clean and read to my father *The Standard Bearer*, *Beacon Lights*, and *The Grand Rapids Press*. She also in her limited way gave him some companionship. This arrangement worked well with the help of other siblings, although as they both aged, the time came when she could no longer do it.

But when that time came and we were pondering our next move, the Lord took our father to heaven. Shortly after he died, my sister said to me, "Now that daddy is dead, my work on earth is finished and I want to die as well. Within six months the Lord granted her this desire.

Since the time of my sister's death, our Protestant Reformed Churches through our schools have done much to educate the children born to our covenant families whom God sent into our lives with physical and mental disabilities. I am amazed at what these programs have done for our special needs children, and often wonder what they could have done for our sister if she had had such opportunities.

The blessings these programs have had in our fellowship are hard to sum up. At the risk of forgetting some of these benefits, I will mention a few.

The children themselves, whether slow learners who can with some help keep up academically with their classes, or are disabled physically and/or mentally and need special attention, have made astounding progress that I never thought possible. As a result of the training they receive, they are benefitted by the preaching; they have opportunities for group Bible studies; they are (through the untiring labors of some parents and young people) able to engage in many activities and sports that normal children take for granted; they are able to hold jobs in businesses that are willing to hire them; they frequently are able to make confession of faith in their congregations and contribute to the life of their fellow saints in the congregation; and they give programs that are so moving that at the end of the program there are few dry eyes in a packed auditorium. They themselves are strengthened in their faith by these programs, because they are able to make their own contributions to the communion of saints.

I have been in many families with special needs children. It is a joy to be in these homes. Parents and children alike receive these children as special gifts of God who by their presence enrich the family. One home comes to mind in which a child so handicapped that he could scarcely show any response to most of what was going on around him, was the center of the life of the family. Not one child could pass his wheelchair without a few words of love, a pat on the head, a kiss on the cheek or a tender touch to ease his isolation.

I have an adopted cousin whose parents did not want him, who grew up in a covenant home, and who is now an active and confessing member in a congregation in which he faithfully ushers. These children are often greater blessings to their families and congregations than “normal” children. They are indeed special blessings that enrich the whole body of Christ.

It all begins with the family. Every family into whose fellowship God sends a child with special needs must first deal spiritually with the question: Why does God send such a child to us? There is, of course, no answer to that question, for as Job had to learn, God is under no obligation to explain to us what he does. Nor are his ways proper objects of our investigation, for his ways are too high for us.

Yet, in a covenant home, such questions do not need answering. When parents and siblings alike reconcile their will to God’s will, they come to experience the blessedness of having such a child in their fellowship. I have been in many homes and talked with many people to whom God gave a special needs child. Two instances in my life will underscore the truth that a special needs child is a great blessing.

One father, grief-stricken at the death of a Downs syndrome son, told me that the loss of his son left him with an empty sense of loneliness that left a hole in his life, which no one could fill, and could only be healed by God’s sustaining grace.

I had an uncle and aunt who were foster parents of a baby boy, who, because of handicaps, was not wanted by his parents. The child grew up in the home and church; the mother died being old and full of days; the father and now-grown son lived together as long as they were able, but had to be separated because of the passing of many years. But their need for each other and their love that bound them together was so great that separation was literally killing them, for they both could not eat and sleep. They had to be brought together again until the father died.

The homes with special needs children are homes filled with love that has its center in the child who has special needs. Indeed, the life of the home revolves around the special needs child and is the more blessed for the presence of this child. Each member considers it a special honor to help his brother or sister.

These blessings extend to the church. I am convinced that special needs children become an important part of the communion of the saints because of our covenant view. I cannot understand how families with a wrong conception of God’s covenant can be reconciled to the presence of such children in their congregations. We believe, as Protestant Reformed Churches, that the children of believing parents are covenant children. They are such not because they belong to a covenantal community; they are covenant children who are regenerated in infancy or even before birth and are numbered among God’s saints. In the one great condition that only counts with God, they are equal to—or even perhaps superior to—every other saint in the household of faith.

Jonathan Edwards, the great Puritan theologian, in his haste to emphasize total depravity, but without any conception of the Bible’s teachings on the covenant, called the children of believers, “A nest of vipers.”

How does one deal with any child born in our homes, but especially with “vipers” who have special needs? The Holy Spirit, the author of all our salvation, works in his great work of sanctification according to a person’s mental and physical abilities. And so, I often wonder, although some special needs children have limited capacity to know and understand the truth, whether they may outshine us in their inner, spiritual life, for we struggle with so many sins and are so often unsuccessful that sin becomes a great burden of shame and sorrow.

I for one would not dare minimize the work of the Holy Spirit by claiming that those with even severe disabilities cannot know their Father in heaven and their Savior. That truth of God’s covenant gives the church and the home incentive to use every means available to give to these children the knowledge of the truth, and to build up in them a sense of their worth and value to God, and therefore to us. They are needed. The home and church would be impoverished without them. Let us never do injustice to the work of the Holy Spirit. He is all-powerful. And if he is able to make of any one of us a saint (when all he has to work with is a useless clod of mud) why cannot he work also in those who are not by our standards “normal?”

And now our schools. I am so pleased with the progress our schools have made in the field of special education that I cannot refrain of expressing my deep and sincere gratitude for all that has been done—by our school boards, by parents who contribute countless hours to make such education possible, and by our special education teachers, who have done such a remarkable job in dealing with our children.

Nor can I forget those parents along with our young people who arrange special activities for these children that are so precious to us. I have no idea what all they do, but I know it is a lot. They contribute their time and energy in helping these children possess a sense of being worthwhile, of being necessary, of being wanted, of being able to do many things that their siblings and classmates do. These young people are the ones who do all the work to prepare these children (some of whom are now adults) for that program given every two years or so—which my wife and I would not miss for anything.

We do injustice to our special needs fellow saints if we say only that our special needs program has been a blessing to them. To me these children have been a greater blessing to all our children than we can measure. I have seen it and know it. When I went to a Christian school such children were teased, mocked and isolated from fellowship with other children. This is, I think, no longer true. When special needs children are mainstreamed as much as possible and are in daily contact with children of the same age on the playground and in the lunch room, it seems to me that our children have learned compassion, love for others, willingness to help, and a desire to make special needs children feel “right at home” whatever the circumstances may be. The special needs children have made our children better Christians.

I don’t doubt that all that I have said has its exceptions. But the fact is that while the biblical truth of God’s everlasting covenant of grace has been a great blessing to our homes, our marriages, and our schools; it has also been a blessing to all of us—a blessing that comes through our special needs children.

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