

Proverbs 22:6 Re-examined

by Rev. Tom Aicken

A Bible verse that a great many people are familiar with is Proverbs 22:6, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” People have offered countless comments on what they think that text means, some even insisting that it is a promise of salvation for all well-raised children from godly homes. That is the view of a school of theology known as ‘covenant succession,’ a way of thinking which promotes the idea that Christians who raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord can fully expect their offspring to gain, sooner or later, a saving interest in Christ. That, they say, is what Proverbs 22:6 is about and that all Christian parents should embrace that promise. It is, however, a completely erroneous view. And why is that? It is erroneous because children do not become the elect of God, chosen in Christ from the foundation of the world, by virtue of their upbringing in time, nor is it true that only elect children will ever receive such godly teaching and discipline. Sadly, there are many children of believing parents who are raised with a godly upbringing yet never come to faith in Christ, and they have no one to blame but themselves for that careless course of life they have chosen and willful rebellion.

Oh, but is there no advantage to proper training? Yes, indeed there is. What children learn from an early age, and continue to see lived out in their parents as they grow to maturity in their home, can be a great incentive to their learning to live a morally responsible life themselves, to pursue a principled life and reject many ways of the world (Proverbs 22:15). More than that, it is often the case that children first hear the call of God in the gospel from Christian parents, and, having done so, they commit themselves to Christ at an early age. It sometimes happens, too, that offspring who are converted late in life testify that they remember the witness of their father or mother years earlier and that the Lord used that, now so many years later, to draw them to Himself. To be sure, there are many advantages to encouraging the God-honouring, Christ-centred training of our young people, but it does not carry with it the promise of salvation for those who receive it. Whatever people perceive Proverbs 22:6 to be about, it does not teach that.

What, then, does this verse mean? To answer that question we have to go back to a better translation of the text itself. Rightly understood, the Hebrew expresses,

“Train up a child in the way he *wants* to go,” – not in the way he *should* go, notice, but in the way he *wants* to go, is inclined to go, is determined to go if left to his own resources– “and when he is old he will not depart from it.” This verse is a warning to parents, therefore, about the importance of a godly upbringing for their children and what they can expect to see if they fail to provide it; it is not a promise of salvation to anyone as a product of faithful parenting.

How is it that so many English translations of the Bible have got this text so wrong? Why do they render it “should go” instead of “wants to go”? Some have traced this error back to the Latin Vulgate, others even further back to the Greek Septuagint, but whatever the case it shows how important it is for the Church to keep a watchful eye on the text of Holy Scripture. Does this imply that the Bible can sometimes be wrong? By no means! The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the Word of God, verbally inspired (2 Timothy 3:15-17) and therefore inerrant right down to the very words chosen to communicate each truth they are set forth to express, and that makes these Scriptures, the Word of God from first to last, the only infallible rule of faith and life (John 10:35). The problem lies, not in what God has given us, but in what men have offered in translation of this revelation, and that is why it calls for such careful examination.

The Bible does not teach covenant succession theology. The children of believers are born into the covenant, that is true, and as such are non-communicant members of the church and are entitled to be baptised. But by no means do those children make it into heaven on the coattails of their parents’ faith and faithful training. The children, rather, along with their parents and anyone else who may come to believe, are received into the kingdom of God through a living faith in Christ which is freely bestowed as a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-10).

It is remarkable, though, how the Lord uses means to bring that about (Romans 10:14-17). We are reminded of the importance of a godly upbringing, and it may well bring to mind the teaching of Deuteronomy 6:4-9. What Proverbs 22:6 teaches is the other side of that, namely, the danger of what will happen naturally if that training is not provided. Let parents beware, therefore, and let children take heed of the same warning. All whom the Father gives to His Son (His elect) will come to Him (John 6:37-40), only those so drawn will come to Him (vv. 44 and 65), and they are the very ones who, having come, will never be cast out.