

REFORMATION SUNDAY 2009: THE LITTLE ONE IN OUR MIDST

Toby Sumpter

Christ Church - Moscow, ID

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INTRODUCTION

It's well known that the Protestant Reformers instigated an overhaul of the Roman church system. Luther recovered justification by faith, the centrality of Christ's life/death/resurrection was reasserted, and right celebration and understanding of the sacraments was worked toward. It's less well known that the Reformers also worked toward a recovery of faithful Church discipline. One of the great church discipline passages is Matthew 18, but what's striking and a bit strange is that Matthew shows us Jesus going from little children to church discipline almost in the same breath. The "children of Israel" weren't paragons of virtue and wisdom. Our children seem barely civilized. So what's the deal?

Luther posted his theses on All Saints Eve, the great culmination of Trinity/Pentecost Season giving glory to God for all His saints, all His faithful down through the ages. The desire to purify the Church was a desire to love the children of Israel, to rescue the lost sheep of the Church, and to defend them from the wolves that had crept into the Church. I want to explore why the Protestant instinct to recover church discipline was a recovery of Jesus' requirement that, "Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." (Mt. 18:3)

CHILDREN

Matthew has three scenarios piled on top of one another, all linked by the subject of "little ones." In answer to the question "who is the greatest in the kingdom?" Jesus sets a little child (paidion) in the middle of them all (18:1-2). Jesus says that they all must be converted and become like little children to enter the kingdom (18:3) which doesn't quite answer the original question. Once they have become little children, they must humble themselves like this child (in the midst of them) has who has become the model for kingdom citizens (18:4). Jesus explains that the path to becoming children is through receiving a little child in His name (18:5). And this is the same as receiving Jesus Himself.

LITTLE ONES

Jesus continues, but He broadens his subject matter with the term "little ones" (micron) (18:6). Children are only one subset of this category. This would include all of the insignificant, the marginalized, the humble, the lost (cf. 18:12-13). The warning Jesus gives seems extreme. It reminds us of the Red Sea crossing and the judgment on Pharaoh's men (Ex. 14-15); it also reminds us of the death of Abimelech whose head was crushed by a millstone (Judg. 9:53). To cause a "little one" to fall into sin is to become an enemy of God's people. So rather than causing one of these little ones to fall into sin, we ought to be at war with everything and everyone who does this. Cut off the hands and feet and pluck out the eye that causes "you" to fall into sin (18:8-9). And in case some might have thought that Jesus' warning was merely hypothetical, Jesus assures them that they have advocates who have access to their Father, the Judge of all the earth (18:10).

ONE LOST SHEEP

Even one lost sheep may seem insignificant, little, trifling, but Jesus says that our Father rejoices more over those little ones, those insignificant ones who have been stumbled, who have fallen into sin and been restored (18:11-13). Nevertheless, our Father's wishes are that none of these little ones should perish. We should not only receive them, not only protect them, but also go searching for them just as God has done for us in Jesus. All of this comes as the context for the famous passage on seeking out a brother who has sinned against you. This is what should be done when someone does fall into sin (18:15ff). Given the context, part of the concern is dealing with those who do cause the little ones to sin. This is one of the ways we deal with "hands/feet/eyes" that cause us to sin. But this can also be viewed as the way we are to seek the little one who has stumbled and strayed. These are instructions for seeking to bring the sinning brother back into our midst, back into the middle of the community.

Refusal to seek out the lost sheep is refusal to receive little ones in our midst, which is tantamount to refusing to be converted and become like little children. We should point out that getting cast out of the Church is worse than drowning in the depths of the sea. Excommunication is an act that hands an individual over to Satan (I Cor. 5:5) which is the beginning of being cast into hell. But refusal to discipline, refusal to seek out the straying sheep is allowing the “hand/feet/eye” to remain and is only more fodder for the fire. Note that Jesus closes these instructions with the promise to be in their midst when they are gathered in His name, just like the child in their midst whom they receive in His name (18:5, 20). When they gather as little children, Jesus will be in their midst.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

God has been very kind to us as a community, granting us a heart for children, and there are a multitude of examples where that love overflows to the sick, the lonely, the weak, and the straying. But we need to make sure we are connecting the dots from loving our children to loving all the little ones.

First, this means seeing the messiness of “little ones” as part of growing up into the wisdom of God. Our children (and all the children in the Church) are types for ministry to the body in general. It’s constant, it’s busy, and it can very easily be frustrating. This means that we need to realize that little ones will act like little ones. Become a child doesn’t mean throwing fits; it means receiving and loving little ones who sometimes do. It’s no accident that Jesus goes from talking about discipline straight into a conversation about forgiveness.

Second, we should not draw a false dichotomy here between loving our little ones and loving the little ones all around us. But we need to have an eye to the big picture. Suppose a brother or sister is in sin, how should you approach them? You should approach them like you would your son or daughter (and vice versa).

Third, the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one lost sheep that is found. God the Father rejoices over the little ones that are restored, and therefore so should we. This means that we need to continue to grow up into a community of restoration, rehabilitation, a community that rejoices in finding the one lost sheep. If your child went missing, surely you would not go about as business as usual. The names of those who have strayed from the faith that we pray for week after week should not become ordinary.

It can be easy to think that the messiness of children and little ones means that everything has gone wrong. And of course sin is always wrong. But welcoming the mess, receiving little ones in Jesus name is receiving Jesus into our midst (18:5). When we face the challenges in Jesus name, we are seeking Jesus in the challenge. And this means we are seeking wisdom. We need Jesus in our midst when we gather in His name for discipline (18:20). And we do this by loving the little ones, protecting the little ones. As we learn this wisdom, we welcome the enthroned Child into our midst (cf. Rev. 12:5).

As we celebrate Reformation Day and All Saints Day, we celebrate becoming like little children, rescuing lost children, protecting the little ones, and welcoming Jesus into our midst.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen!

