

### **Shelter, Nurture, Fellowship**

*Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 4:2-6; Psalm 27:1-5; Ephesians 6:1-4; Matthew 11:28-30; 23:37*

### **IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

On this morning when we install and ordain new elders and deacons, I want to challenge the session, deacons, and entire congregation to begin to pray and ask urgently, "How can we more effectively shelter, nurture and provide spiritual fellowship for the children of God?"

**First**, our Church, under the leadership of the session and deacons, has the responsibility of sheltering the children of God.

As parents, we believe that one of our primary goals is to provide shelter for our children. WE have a responsibility not only to provide our children with a warm house that protects us from the elements, but also to shelter them from unbelief and wickedness. But imagine parents whose main concern is their home and not their children.

Until our church is rebuilt this will be a real danger. WE have over 500 men and women on the rolls. We probably have over 100 baptized children and young adults who've never made a profession of faith in Jesus. And yet we're actually sheltering only about 200 of these people. Many have run away, fallen away, and some have been lost. Hundreds are like homeless people sleeping out in the cold without shelter. And Christ cries over these people. He loves these people. "How often I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

We can't force these inactives to find refuge in Christ, but if we have the mind of Christ it will be one of our foremost concerns to make a concerted effort to provide spiritual shelter for the children of God. This is far more important than the construction of the physical building. What more can our session, deacons, and active members do to shelter the children of God?

**Secondly**, our church has the responsibility of nurturing the children of God. The Greek word for nurture means "upbringing, training, instruction, discipline correction."

The primary purpose of Christian education, both in the home, and in the Church School, is to train and instruct the children of God in such basic Christian disciplines as daily prayer, daily reading of the Bible, grace at meals, stewardship of all the resources God has given us, simplicity of lifestyle, service to the community, corporate worship and personally sharing the gospel to others. This is done, not only through classroom teaching but through example.

Every member of the church should know at least a minimum of basic Christian teaching about God and human nature. Who is God? What has God done for our salvation? How can I know and serve God? Who is Jesus? Why is his death and resurrection central to our faith. What's God's purpose for my life? What's God's purpose for the world? As a Christian church we have definite answers to those questions and it's terribly important that we all know what the answers are and how to communicate them to people who aren't asking the right questions.

Edward Hirsch of the University of Virginia, in his best-selling book *Cultural Literacy*, writes “By the age of 13 all cultures...have used memorization to carry on their tradition.” By the age of thirteen every covenant child should have memorized The Lord’s Prayer, The Ten Commandments, and the Apostles’ Creed. They should be able to state clearly that we’re put right with God by God’s grace alone, received through faith in Jesus Christ. They should be able to state in simple language the meaning of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They should be able to state that the most important thing in life is to love God and neighbor. They should be able to repeat the correct answers even if they don’t believe them.

Stanley Hauerwas writes, “I can’t think of a more conformist and suicidal message than that we should encourage students to make up their own minds. That will simply insure that they assume that ideas are just another product that you get to choose on the basis of your arbitrary likes and dislikes. To encourage students to think for themselves is a sure way to avoid any meaningful disagreement. That’s the reason that I tell my students that my first objective is to help them think just like me.” The church has a primary responsibility to nurture the children of God, therefore, to give definite guidance, instruction, direction and correction.

**Third**, one of the primary responsibilities of the church, under the leadership of the session and deacons, is to promote the spiritual fellowship of the children of God. The Greek word for “fellowship” is kolvova. It has the basic meaning of “sharing.” It means “sharing joys and sorrows.” It’s usually much easier to cope with sadness if you’re able to share it with someone else. The very act of sharing a problem can work wonders. Knowing that someone else is remembering your difficulties in their prayers can be of enormous comfort.

But fellowship also means the sharing of material goods and wealth. The apostles held all things in common. Each gave according to his or her ability, and each received according to his or her need. We need that kind of mutual commitment within our Church to a far greater degree. In the early Christian communities, widows and orphans were singled out as needing special care and compassion. Few things are more crucial for the life of our church than to promote fellowship that’s centered around Jesus Christ.

I was talking to one of the associate pastors at the Highland Presbyterian Church in Lancaster. One of his jobs is to try to involve all new members in some way in the life of the church within a year of their joining. It may be a Sunday School class, a choir, working on a Habitat for Humanity project, volunteering in their pre-school, serving on a committee, being involved in a prayer group or a small group Bible study. New members who don’t become involved in the life of the church within a year nearly always drift away and become nominal and inactive members. One of the primary goals of our church should be to promote and provide spiritual fellowship.

One of the great ends of the church is the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God. These should be among the most important goals we strive for this year. I hope that what I’ve said will spark discussion among yourselves and with me. More than that, I hope that what I’ve said will spark action...a renewal of all of us to major on what is really important.

*Let us pray: O Lord, empower us to fulfill your mission. Give us the right priorities. We pray for this church, enable us to shelter, nurture, and enjoy spiritual fellowship so that we might be protected from all evil, might grow strong as your children, bear one another's burdens. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.*