

Exegetical Brief: Train? Initiate? Or Dedicate?

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Proverbs 22:6 is one of the most familiar proverbs. In the NIV it reads, "Train a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not turn from it." This proverb is often cited by Christian educators as support for various child-rearing theories and programs, but when we look at the Hebrew text, we see that its meaning and application are far from simple.

חֲנֹךְ לְנֶעֶר עַל־פִּי דָרְכוֹ
גַּם כִּי־יִזְקֵן לֹא־יִסּוּר מִמֶּנָּה:

Each of the words in the first line presents some difficulty. חֲנֹךְ is the imperative of a verb that may be translated "dedicate" every other time that it appears in the Old Testament. It most often refers to the dedication of a building (Dt 20:5, 1 Kg 8:63). The noun derived from this verb means "dedication" and gives its name to the festival of dedication, Hanukkah.

Some commentators contend that חֲנֹךְ means "initiate into service" or "use for the first time" rather than dedicate. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* even makes the rather strange claim that חֲנֹךְ does not contain the idea of dedication to someone or something although its synonyms do.

"Train," thus, is not a regular translation of this term, but is inferred from the context of this verse. Some commentators, therefore, claim that in our passage the emphasis is not so much on teaching the child, but on putting him into service, that is, giving him experience.

The word נֶעֶר is not limited to small children. A more appropriate word for that would be יָלֵד. נֶעֶר may refer to adolescents or even young adults who are embarking on a career, like an army lieutenant or a junior bureaucrat. Some, therefore, claim that this passage does not refer to the training of children, but to the initiation of young men into government service.

עַל־פִּי which literally means "according to the mouth of," is translated "according to the measure of" or "conformably to."

דָרְכוֹ literally means "his way." It has been given three principle interpretations:

1) the way that is appropriate for this child as an individual. The passage is then used to support the idea that we should train each child according to its own individual gifts and aptitudes. This is sound pedagogy, but it is doubtful if it is the thrust of this passage. A variant of this view is that the child should be trained according to the occupation or office which he will hold in life. (A small minority of commentators give this interpretation a negative twist: let a child go in his own ways, and you will never break him of his bad habits.)

2) the way that is appropriate for a child, that is, by using terminology and methods suitable for a child. Again, this is sound pedagogy, but not likely the emphasis of this passage.

3) the way that is right and appropriate, that is, the way of the Lord. This is the traditional understanding and seems most appropriate in the context of Proverbs. It is the interpretation suggested by the NIV.

Although the wording of this proverb is a bit unusual, there is no compelling reason to depart from the traditional understanding. I would translate, "Dedicate a child to his [proper] way. Even when he grows old, he will not turn aside from it." The word "dedicate" indicates that the child or young man is being initiated into a whole way of life. When we train children in the way of the Lord, we are dedicating them to a life of serving the Lord. We are training them, not simply for our own satisfaction or sense of self-fulfillment, but with the hope that they will dedicate themselves to the service of the Lord, their Creator and Redeemer. Training the child is one way we fulfill our responsibility to the Lord for dedicating back to him the children whom he has loaned to us.

One last question is whether the advice of this proverb comes with a guarantee.

This passage has produced feelings both of hope and guilt in many parents. It has given faithful parents, who are striving to raise their children in the fear of the Lord, the encouragement that their efforts will not be in vain. On the other hand, parents who have experienced the sorrow of seeing a child turn away from God may blame themselves and wonder, "What did we do wrong?" Others in the same situation may see in this proverb the promise that their wayward child will eventually turn back to the truth when he or she is old.

But we should remember that a proverb is not necessarily a promise. A few biblical proverbs may express universal promises. Other proverbs are simply observations about the way things are in life. Most biblical proverbs, however, can be classified as wise advice. This proverb, therefore, advises parents what they should do for their children and indicates the result which can generally be expected from such training. It is also generally true that lack of discipline will produce a wayward child (Proverbs 29:15). Our text, however, does not make a universal promise that every child who receives a good training will turn out good in the end. A child's wayward behavior may be due, not to any defect in the training provided by the parents, but to the child's spiteful rejection of that training (Proverbs 13:1).

This proverb then is not intended to promote any particular theory of child-training, nor to blame all wayward behavior on parental negligence, but to encourage parents to dedicate their children to the service of the Lord by training them in the way of the Lord.