

VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

by John Heikoop

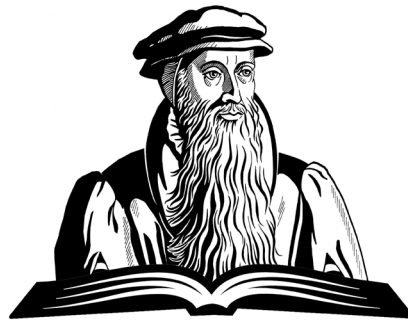
FOUNDATIONS

of

CHRISTIAN
EDUCATION

Lecture #2

The Child



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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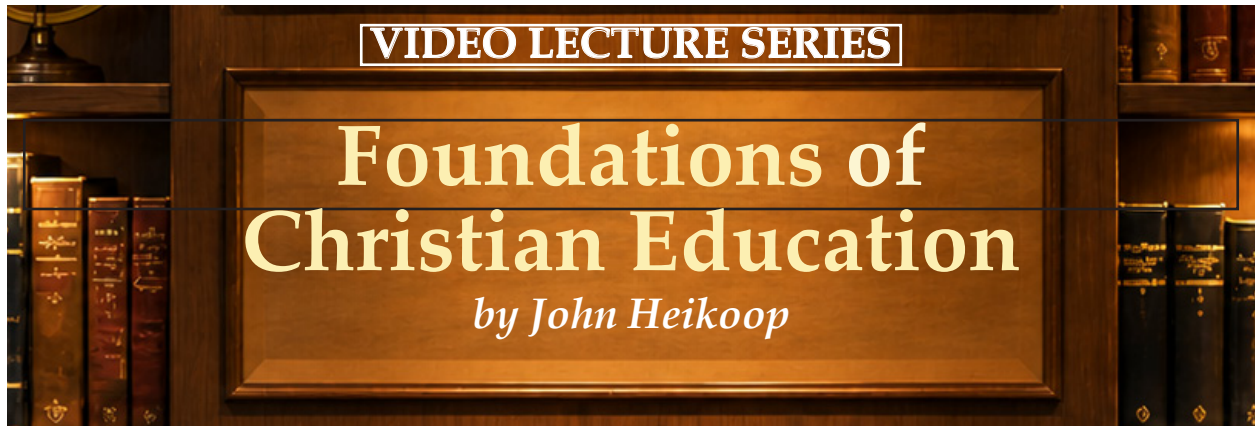
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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Authorized King James Version.

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He and his wife, JoAnne, have eight children and a growing number of grandchildren.



1. Introduction to Foundations of
Christian Education

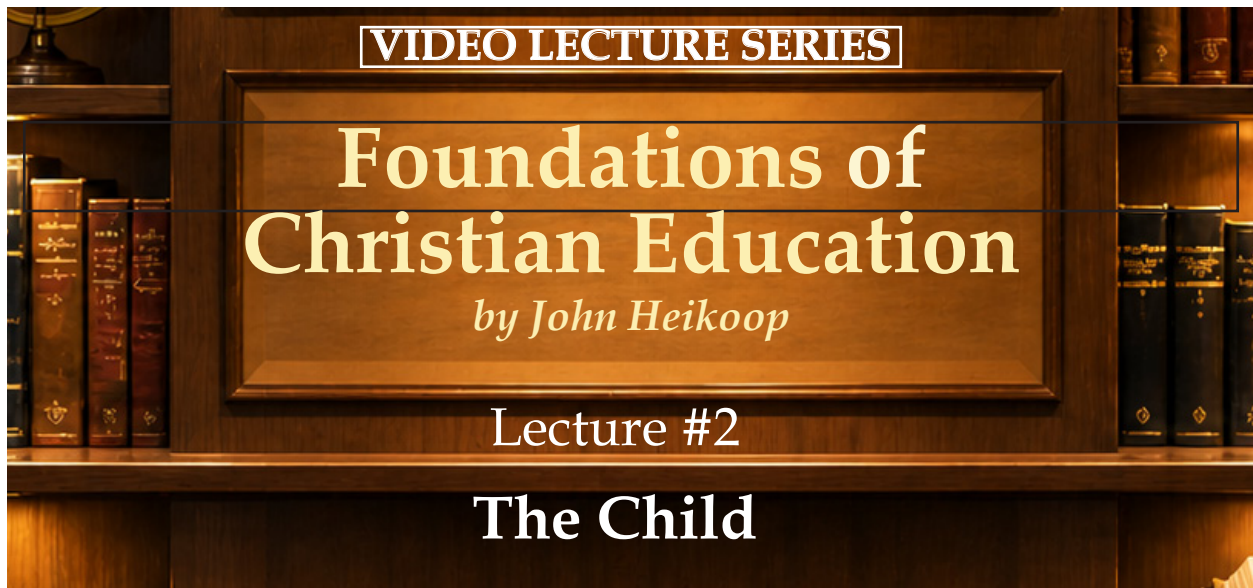
2. The Child

3. The Home

4. The Cuirriculum

5. The Teacher

6. Christian Education in Its Various Forms



Dear friends, welcome back to *The Foundations of Christian Education* series, presented by the John Knox Institute of Higher Education.

In our first lesson, we asked why we educate, what Christian education truly is, and where God commands it in his Word. We saw that God has a sovereign right upon every aspect of life, and therefore upon every aspect of the educational enterprise. We saw that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and that the most important need of every child is not academic achievement but to be born again.

That last truth leads us directly to the question we must address in this lesson, perhaps the most foundational question in all of Christian education: Who is this child? What is their nature? What do they truly need? And what does God therefore require of us? How you answer those questions will determine how you teach, how you discipline, and how you speak, how you pray, and what you ultimately hope for. Everything in Christian education flows from this starting point.

1. The Highest Possible View of the Child

We begin with the highest possible view of the child. The Bible teaches us that God has created and upholds all things for his own good pleasure. He has created us to glorify and serve him with our whole being in every aspect of life. If God has a divine right upon every aspect of life, then he must also be recognized as sovereign over the child. Children are not primarily ours. They are a heritage of the Lord, a gift, a stewardship, and an answer to prayer, given to parents who are answerable to him for how they are raised. [Psalm 127, verse 3](#), “Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward.”

When the disciples of the Lord Jesus tried to turn away children as unimportant, his response was immediate and clear. He took them up in his arms, and put his hands upon them, and he blessed them. Here, the Lord of glory, the King of kings, received children with loving compassion, and commands us to do the same, and to the same duty, “Suffer the little children to come unto me.” Christ desires to receive children and reproved the disciples for thinking and acting differently. [Mark 10, verses 14 and 16](#), “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God....And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.”

And God Himself has appointed the means by which children are to be brought to this knowledge. He did not leave it to the state, or to culture, or to chance. God appointed parents to faithfully instruct their children out of his word. [Psalm 78, verses 5 to 7](#), "For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: that the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments."

That they might set their hope in God—that is the goal. Not merely that they would know the facts about God, but that they would set their hope in him. And God has appointed that goal to be reached through the faithful instruction of parents and teachers, generation by generation, child by child.

The world around us holds, however, a very different view of the child. In many cultures, children are regarded not as a gift from God but as a burden, a cost, a lifestyle choice to be avoided, and so, our generation is guilty of millions of abortions each year. Some say the child belongs primarily to the state. Others follow Rousseau or Plato and say the child is born essentially innocent or inherently wise, and that education must just draw out what is already there. None of these views are Christian. God's Word is clear—our children come into this world not in innocence, but as sinners in need of instruction in knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness.

In the biblical account of the creation, man stands apart from every other creature God made. Of everything else—the stars, the sea, the animals—God simply spoke, and it was. But of man alone do we read of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost taking special counsel, "Let us make man." Of man alone do we read that God personally formed the body out of the ground and personally breathed life into it. And of man alone do we read that God created man in His own image. [We read that in Genesis 1, verse 27](#), "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."

Every child born into this world bears traces of that image—rationality, a never-dying soul, capable of communion with God, a conscience, a deep awareness of right and wrong. These set human beings apart from every other creature on earth, and they carry profound implications for how we handle, speak to, and value every child placed in our care.

And this applies to every child without exception. Not only to academically-gifted, not only to the child who is easy to teach. Every child placed in our care—the child who struggles to read, the child with learning difficulties, the child with physical or developmental challenges—every one of them is fearfully and wonderfully made. [We read in Psalm 139, verse 14](#), "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well."

God makes no mistakes. The child with special needs is also a child formed by God with particular purposes and particular needs that God calls his people to meet with compassion, patience, and creativity. The Lord Jesus himself modeled this during his time on earth. When he saw those who were blind, lame, hungry, or mentally tormented, we read that he was moved with compassion toward them. He taught them, and he healed them. Paul's message, in 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 14, applies this principle to all: "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men." Education that attends only to the top twenty percent of students has misunderstood what it means to educate children made in the image of God. Our calling is to every child. All are a heritage of the Lord.

2. The Child is Also a Fallen Sinner

Though the child bears God's image, the child is also a fallen sinner. And while the light of nature and the works of creation reveal God to us, his Word is the full revelation and the only means of salvation. And that Word is plain—sin has caused mankind to fall from original righteousness and become spiritually dead. In like manner, our children are born in sins and trespasses and are guilty of this from their very beginning, as the Apostle Paul and the psalmist both declare. [Psalm 51, verse 5](#), “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

You do not need to teach a child to be selfish or to rebel. Watch your children at play. The instinct to grab, to take, to insist on one's own way, to resist correction appears without instruction. These come naturally from a nature that is dead in sins and trespasses. Our baptism form expresses it plainly: “We with our children are conceived and born in sin, and therefore are children of wrath, insomuch that we cannot enter into the kingdom of God except we are born again.” Our children are dear and precious, but they are not innocent.

The Canons of Dordt state this with the same sobering clarity, in the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, Article 3. You read there that all men have sinned in Adam and lie under the curse, and are deserving of eternal death. This is the honest account of the human condition as God Himself has revealed it, and it must inform how we educate every child in our care.

There is a common and well-meaning error in some Christian education, addressing students as though all of our children are children of God, and as if the new birth can be assumed for all children who are raised in Christian homes. But we may not presume that our children are redeemed until the Lord works savingly in their lives. We must speak to children honestly, acknowledging their need of saving grace and inviting each one to seek the Lord.

This is what the Lord Jesus did when Nicodemus came to him. A ruler and a teacher of Israel, raised under the covenant, and Jesus said unto him plainly, “Ye must be born again”—not improved, not educated out of your errors—born again. [John 3, verse 3](#), “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” But notice that the Lord Jesus does not stop there. He goes on to set before Nicodemus the full message of the gospel. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son....God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (verses 14–17).

Our Reformed confessions maintain this same balance—the full weight of man's sin stated plainly, followed immediately by the free and full offer of Christ to all. In the Canons of Dordt, Second Head, Article 5, [we read](#), “The promise of the gospel is, that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified, shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of his good pleasure sends the gospel.” This includes our children. The purpose of schooling is not to form or to produce Christians. That is solely the work of God. The school encourages children to use the means of grace—reading, teaching, and applying, and praying over the Word—which are divinely appointed for working salvation. We sow in faith, and we leave the harvest entirely to him.

3. What Does This View of the Child Require?

Then what does this view of the child require of those who educate them? Education must be Christ-centred, teacher-directed, and child-oriented. Christian instruction must continually remind

children of their accountability to their Creator who has a right upon their lives. Children must be shown their responsibility to use the gifts that God gives them to the utmost of their ability, to God's glory and their neighbor's good.

Now, while these truths about the child's fallen condition and need of grace are always in the background—and we pray for God's blessing upon our children daily—the actual focus of teaching days is something more immediate and practical. Whether in elementary school, in middle school, secondary school, or as a principal, the greater part of our daily effort is directed towards preparing students for future life in this world—for work, for family, for vocation, and for community; for leadership and service in church, society, or for higher education; for a place in business, and for general responsibilities in adult life. And that preparation happens in the classroom, on the playground, during school trips, in marking of assignments, and in planning lessons. This is an important aspect of the God-honoring labor to which teachers and parents are called day by day.

And the view of the child we have been considering is exactly what gives that daily labor its meaning and its weight. We are not merely training workers or citizens. We are forming image bearers of God, never-dying souls who, with us, have eternity before them. And that is what lies behind every lesson planned and every child corrected. Over thirty-two years, I often came back to one great question from the Apostle Paul as the governing question of the teacher's calling: Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? Not what does the curriculum require, not what does the timetable demand, but what does the Lord require of me in relation to this child, in this moment, in this classroom?

There are two worldviews at work in every educational context. The world's worldview places the self at the centre—education exists to help *me* discover *my* potential, achieve *my* goals, fulfil *my* ambitions. And this is Satan's lie, the same lie that deceived Adam and Eve: "Ye shall be as gods" (Genesis 3:5). The biblical worldview is altogether different—God created man for service, to love God above all and my neighbor as myself. I once told a class of Grade 8 graduates the story of James III. His dying mother had asked him to always remember that his name was not James, but James the third—God first, neighbor second, and himself *third*. That is the ordering the fear of the Lord produces, and that is the character Christian education must seek to set forth.

Dear friends, the view of the child that we hold will be visible, not primarily in what we say in Bible class, but in how we actually handle, speak to, and deal with children in the daily reality of the classroom and in the home. It will be seen in whether we receive the difficult child with patience or frustration; in whether we take the time to discipline and to speak the truth in love; in whether we seek to point our students to Christ, who was lifted up for sinners; in whether we invest the community's resources to support the child with special needs or whether we look the other way; in whether we teach to the top twenty percent or to every child placed in our care. Actions speak louder than words.

Every child in our classrooms and our homes has a never-dying soul and has eternal value. They are a special creation of God, bearing traces of his image, fallen from original righteousness, and in desperate need of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, yet brought near under the covenant and placed within reach of the means of grace. That view of the child, held in all its sobering depth and all its hope, is the foundation on which everything else in Christian education is built.

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do in the education of these children, do it with thy might, and do it with this assurance: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest"—Ecclesiastes 9, verse 10. And Paul adds this word of assurance: [1 Corinthians 15, verse 58](#), "Therefore, my beloved

brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”

May the Lord grant us wisdom to see every child as he sees them — sinners in need of grace, for whom Christ was lifted up. And may he give us diligence in the work, patience in the trials, and the comfort of knowing that our labor in his name is never in vain.

In our next lesson we turn to the Christian home—the primary institution of Christian education, the place where this view of the child must be most deeply lived out.