

say that sexual intimacy is better and that children do better in committed marriages—marriages that are witnessed before extended family, community, churches and the state. Increasingly, the social sciences have been willing to say as much. Why not the Presbyterians?

The report was right on some things: that Christians are not saved by their families, that they should not pursue the welfare of their own families at the expense of others, that early Christianity had impulses toward gender equality in families, and that the claims of the Reign (Kingdom) of God have priority over the private good of families.

The report's conviction, however, that acceptance and inclusiveness will cure all the ills of families left it with very few concrete proposals to offer. Should Presbyterians be part of the emerging marriage movement? Should they provide widespread marriage education in their churches? Should they participate in the marriage education programs being promoted in states such as Oklahoma and Florida and communities such as Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Chattanooga, Tennessee? Should they support the covenant marriage movement in Louisiana and Arkansas, the Bush marriage initiative, the removal of the marriage penalty, the increase of the child tax exemptions, or new proposals from legal scholars to make long-term cohabitation equal to marriage before the state without the consent of the cohabiting couple? Where are the Presbyterians on these vigorously debated issues?

The report mostly devoted itself to arguing that there really isn't much of a problem with families that warm acceptance by churches won't cure. It imagined that if this acceptance is forthcoming, poor people, blacks, Asians, Hispanics and all kinds of diverse families will flock to mainly white, middle- and upper-class churches. I doubt it, for the simple reason that the entire report functions to explain away the family problems of these groups. This report is a marvelous example of how elitism can march under the banner of inclusiveness. ■

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A LETTER TO DEREK

## Gifts and achievements

by Gilbert Meilaender

DEAR DEREK: I have not forgotten the day we learned that you would be coming to live with us. I was sitting in my office at Oberlin and Mom called. She said that Children Services had a three-month-old boy who was due to come out of the hospital but could not be sent home to his biological parents. They needed to place him in a foster home and wanted to know if we'd take him.

At the time, we were only doing foster care for preadoptive infants, and you were not one. Still, though you didn't fit the profile, there you were. Ready to leave the hospital, needing a home. And the question was: Would we take you? Mom and I talked it over, and I can still remember saying to her, just as casually as I might comment on the weather, "Well, if you want to, it's OK with me."

Here we are, 18 years later, and it's still OK with me. But I have often thought about that moment, about how casually I made what turned out to be a lifelong commitment, and about how such moments shape our lives. I'll want to say more about that. For today, though, I want to write words about both the debt of thanks you owe to others and the pride you should take in where you've come.

You were, you know, born very prematurely, and you had a rough start in life that left you behind in lots of ways. For a long time I wasn't sure you could ever catch up. Clearly, you have, but you didn't accomplish it on your own. I'm not sure any little child ever got more attention from older brothers and sisters than you got from Peter, Ellen and Hannah. Peter throwing the ball to you time after time and then chasing it down when you threw it who-knows-where. Ellen and Hannah playing games with you for hours on end. But for all the thanks you owe them, you owe still more to Mom. It would be impossible to count the hours she devoted to you—driving you to therapists, reading up on

your problems, giving you attention in the countless ways that you needed to catch up and, then, to flourish.

In short, you owe a considerable debt of gratitude to others for where you've come today. You couldn't have done it without them, but it's also true that you've done it. We're proud of the person you've become—and you should be too. You have accomplished a great deal through sheer force of will and perseverance. You can picture it a little like those moving belts in the airport. Because the belt moves as you walk along it, your rate of progress depends on its help. But still, if you want to move along quickly, you yourself have to walk.

I hope over the years you'll keep both of these truths in mind: that you owe much to others, and that we give you credit for what you've achieved. And really, you know, even though your case is special because you were adopted, both of these lessons are true for all of us. We're all indebted from the start, before we are even able to form the words "thank you." There's really no repaying such debts. All we can do is be grateful.

One way we show that gratitude is precisely by applying ourselves—as you have done. We don't waste all the help we've received. We're most likely not to do that when we learn to recognize even our greatest achievements as, finally, gifts from others and from God. It's not that there are some things you received from others for which you must be thankful—and others things that you've accomplished on your own. No. The very things you accomplish are also the gifts of others. And the points of those gifts is precisely that you should live and flourish. I trust that you will.

Love,  
Dad

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*Gilbert Meilaender teaches at Valparaiso University. This is the first in a series of letters to his son.*



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