

Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites

As I'm reading through the Old Testament in the Holman Christian Standard Bible and the English Standard Version of the Bible, I've arrived in the dizzyingly detailed territory known as the book of Numbers. In chapter four, I read about three groups of people: the Kohathites, the Gershonites, and the Merarites, all smaller clans within the larger tribe known as the Levites.

What catches my attention about the account of these three families is Moses' sheer cheek (some might say arrogance or conceit) as he assigns entire families their roles – many of them involving back-breaking labor. No opinion poll is mentioned in the biblical story, and no feedback is asked for. There is only what God has said by the mouth of His man Moses, and the expectation that His people will fall in line with His plan.

OK. What does that have to do with the Dundalk's First Baptist Church in September of 2004?

Well, the passage suggests questions: as our kids go back to school, and as we go on with our jobs and lives, what has God said about the roles He has assigned us? Do we have any specific assignments at home? at school? on the job? in the community? And, just as importantly, are we shouldering our tasks with submissive joy? or are we rebelliously refusing to be told what our lives should look like? Let me give just one example of what I'm talking about – one among thousands.

I've heard quite a list of reasons people don't require church attendance of their children, and many of their reasons show quite a lot of thought, restraint, and even wisdom. Yet they also reveal how deeply worldly we are in our assumptions, and how pitifully pagan our children's core beliefs often are. I know you think I just contradicted myself, so let me clarify that seeming contradiction.

There's more than a little thoughtfulness, self-restraint, and, yes, wisdom in recognizing that rebels tend only to rebel more when they are forced to submit. Our worldliness consists in our failing to see that a "Christian" kid's unwillingness to go to church is a rebellion problem. It's sin, calling for the young man (or woman) to repent and be reconciled to the God he has disregarded and offended. (And no, open rebellion is not a "normal," unavoidable stage of development in a Christian young person. Questioning the roles is. So is testing the limits. But open rebellion against parents is open rebellion against God. Anyone who says otherwise is just making excuses for his own sin and his children's.) In other words, if my kids hate public worship that much, my family has a problem that needs solving long before it erupts in a kid's boycotting church.

You see, God has assigned us roles, for our good and for His glory. He didn't consult with us before He assigned them, nor did He need to. He made us and He owns us. Among the many things He reveals to be true about us is that He designed us to be happier, healthier, and holier when we live as an actively engaged part of a worshiping community of brothers and sisters in Christ – a church.

We submit to His plan when we sing full-hearted and full-throated because we think deeply about and agree joyfully with what we're singing. (That's why He calls parents, especially fathers, to discipline their children to sing in church, and discipline themselves to lead the way.) We follow His will when we listen to the preaching closely, insist that our children do the same, talk together about the truths we've heard, and bring the kids and their questions to the preacher whenever necessary. We invite God's blessing when we tithe with deliberate, disciplined gladness, and teach our children to do the same. Children raised in that kind of atmosphere aren't likely to squabble much with their folks about churchgoing when they're thirteen, nor to just up and abandon the role of "churchman" the day they turn eighteen.

Whether you like it (or even know it) or not, God has assigned roles to us and our families. (He's not much influenced by American public opinion, and our dislike for the idea of "assigned roles" over the last few decades hasn't fazed Him in the least.) "Churchman" is one role that He assigns. "Father" is another, and so is "mother." This may not be a popular month to make the point, but "student" is another role that God has given to some of us. Whatever your roles are, God calls you to accept them willingly and labor at them joyfully. Don't rebel against them! There is pain and a curse waiting for rebels, and joy and blessing waiting for those who will trust and obey.