

Children

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

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UNIVERSITY

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A VIBRANT THEOLOGY OF CHILDREN

Many distorted and simplistic views of children see them as commodities, consumers, or economic burdens, or only as sinful creatures that are 'not yet fully human.' In Scripture and Christian tradition we discover a richer picture of childhood that should inspire creative religious education and renewed commitment to serving all children.

THE CHILDHOOD OF JESUS

The mystery of God's incarnation in the child Jesus is a memorable theme in the Gospel of Luke. Why is it important that Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom" through the influence of his human family?

LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF THE MANGER

What is the significance of God choosing, in becoming human, to take on the fragility of infancy and vulnerability of childhood? When we prayerfully reflect on the suffering of the Christ Child with the same seriousness as that of the Christ Man, we will recognize and serve the needs of children entrusted to our care.

BEYOND NOAH'S ARK

We want to invite our children to feast on Scripture's rich banquet of stories of promise, deliverance, human failure, and divine forgiveness and fidelity. But how should we go about imparting to them a deep knowledge of the Bible?

CARING FOR CHILDREN IN CRISIS

How should we respond to the pain and grief that children suffer in crises such as sexual abuse, divorce, and death? We can respond in creative ways to God's call to care for children beyond our own families and faith communities.

PARENTING VIRTUES

Parenting can be an unnerving prospect, for it opens us to vulnerability, change, and being permanently shaped by the habits we practice. Yet, as we parent with Christian intentionality, how may we be advanced in holiness by our children and shaped into new creations embodying hope, humility, and hospitality?

Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

In Scripture and Christian tradition we discover a rich picture of childhood that should inspire creative religious education for children in our families and faith communities, and renewed commitment to serving all children.

Within the body of Christ, we are being knit together not only with adults and young people, but also with children as “members one of another.” How should we care for the children within our families and congregations? What can we learn from them and how should we allow them to care for us?

If we “order our lives for the good of our children,” Rodney Clapp has noted, “we will be odd and out of step with our neighbors because we live in a society that cares little for the welfare of children.” How does the gospel commission us to serve the needs of children who are beyond our families and faith communities?

Our contributors remind us that though many of us are expressing concerns about children—Are they being raised with love and affection? Are they safe in their homes and schools? Will they have faith that they live out in service and compassion toward others?—our actions, not only in our society, but even in our churches, reveal a lack of commitment to them. “Within our churches and society are distorted and simplistic views of children,” Marcia Bunge warns, “that see them as commodities, consumers, or economic burdens,” or only as “sinful creatures that are ‘not yet fully human.’” In *A More Vibrant Theology of Children* (p. 11), she develops a richer picture of childhood in Scripture and Christian tradition that could be “a solid foundation for creative religious education, serious theological reflection on children, and renewed commitment to serving all children.”

Margaret Eletta Guider, O.S.F., believes we will recognize and serve the needs of children entrusted to our care only if “we prayerfully reflect on the suffering of the Christ Child with the same seriousness as that of the Christ Man.” In *Living in the Shadow of the Manger* (p. 20), she invites us to meditate on the significance of God choosing, in becoming human, to take on the fragility of infancy and vulnerability of childhood.

The mystery of God’s incarnation in the child Jesus is a key theme of Gerrit van Honthorst’s *Childhood of Christ* (p. 36) and a remarkable manuscript illumination, *Jesus Among the Doctors* (p. 50). Both images convey that Jesus “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom” through the influence of his human family, Heidi Hornik points out. While Honthorst emphasizes Joseph’s role in guiding the young Jesus, the manuscript illumination reminds us of when Jesus taught the teachers in the Temple.

We want to invite our children to feast on Scripture’s rich banquet of “stories of promise, deliverance, human failure, and divine forgiveness and fidelity,” Susan Garrett writes in *Beyond Noah’s Ark* (p. 29). But how should we go about imparting to them a deep, life-giving knowledge of the Bible? With tips for finding time in busy schedules and for responding to a child’s hard questions, Garrett shows how to go beyond the limited selection found in story-Bibles, which can be the spiritual equivalent of fast-food take-out meals.

Developing Christian practice and virtue in our children is a complex matter, Robert Sloan reminds us in *On Raisin’ Abel* (p. 61). The Bible does not provide “sure-fire, step-by-step instructions for parents to follow,” but promises that “when parents are faithful in their responsibilities, there is a fair expectation of a good result.” The Apostle Paul instructs parents and their children to be accountable to one another; “in other words,” Sloan writes, “parents and children are partners—even if unequal ones—in the process of parenting.” David Johns, in *Parenting Virtues Today* (p. 53), also explores how we learn from our children and are formed in virtue through our caring relationship to them: “as we parent with Christian intentionality, we may be advanced in holiness by our children and shaped into new creations embodying hope, humility, and hospitality.”

“We should cultivate the habit of blessing our children,” Sloan urges, for “blessing our children, by simply and regularly hugging them and whispering a prayer in their ear, invites the Spirit of the living God to become part of the parenting and maturing process. In this sense, a parent’s blessing of a child acquires a certain sacramental quality.” Rembrandt’s *Jacob Blessing the Children of Joseph* (p. 48) echoes this theme by wonderfully depicting the patriarch’s gracious blessing on both of Joseph’s children.

Reminding us of our common childhood before God, Harriet Ziegenhals’ new hymn *We All Are God’s Children* (p. 39) celebrates all children of the world: “We’ll care for each other, sister and brother, children across

the sea." Through prayers and readings she leads us in celebrating and blessing children in this issue's service of corporate worship (p. 42). LeDayne McLeese Polaski's meditation on Psalm 139:13-15, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (p. 69), continues this worship theme. "Children harbor God-given gifts waiting to be discovered," Polaski observes, and we are to "nurture the unfolding of what God wove into the children in our families, churches, schools, and neighborhoods, as well as the children whom we will never know."

Christians are responding in creative ways to God's call to care for children beyond their families and faith communities. Joy Jordan-Lake's *Hanging In Through It All* (p. 73) introduces pediatrician Gloria White-Hammond, who reaches out to at-risk youth in inner-city Boston and treats the health of women recently released from slavery in Sudan. In *Children for Sale* (p. 79) Jordan-Lake follows attorney Shannon Sedgwick on a successful sting operation to rescue children forced into prostitution in Cambodia. "The closest I have ever come to seeing my God was in [the rescued girls'] beautiful smiling faces," Sedgwick says. "I can only imagine what heaven looks like, but I did get a glimpse in Cambodia."

"Sometimes we confuse what is best for children with what elicits happiness," Mark McClintock says in *Good Grief!* (p. 65). Rather than simply engage grieving children in cheerful activities, McClintock guides them "in developing healthy patterns of grieving—behaviors that will facilitate their encounters with loss throughout their lives." His puppet, Sidney, becomes an effective counseling tool, for an imaginary character diminishes the communication barrier between adults and grieving children. In *Caring for Children in Crisis* (p. 84), Helen Harris reviews three brief books that provide a fresh look at childhood grief in crises of divorce, sexual abuse, or death: Douglas Adams' *Children, Divorce and the Church*, R. Timothy Kearney's *Caring for Sexually Abused Children: A Handbook for Families & Churches*, and Theresa Huntley's *Helping Children Grieve: When Someone They Love Dies*.

"By shifting away from more impersonal, instruction-based models that predominate in Christian education," Bob Fox notes in his review article, *Nurturing Children in Faithfulness* (p. 89), we can take children more seriously in the church family. John Westerhoff's classic *Will Our Children Have Faith?* questions the educational models appropriated by the church from the secular sphere, and Catherine Stonehouse helpfully canvases child development theory in *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*. Fox commends for church group study Marva Dawn's *Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children*, for her conviction is that "empowered with God's direction, the church can aggressively confront the world and can help its children de-emphasize cultural conditioning." ❖

A More Vibrant Theology of Children

BY M A R C I A J . B U N G E

Within our churches and society are distorted and simplistic views of children. How can we correct the “market mentality” that sees them as commodities, consumers, or economic burdens? How can we see them as more than sinful creatures that are ‘not yet fully human’? The richer picture of childhood in Scripture and Christian tradition is a solid foundation for creative religious education, serious theological reflection on children, and renewed commitment to serving all children.

Many of us are expressing concerns about children today. Are they being raised with love and affection? Are they receiving a good education? Are they safe in their homes and schools? Are they being exposed to good role models? Will they have a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives? Will they contribute in positive ways to society? In the church we also ask, will our children have faith? Will they live out that faith in service and compassion toward others?

While we express such concerns, our actions—not only in our society, but even in our churches—reveal a lack of commitment to children. Many countries fail to meet even the basic needs of children, and children around the world suffer hunger, poverty, abuse and neglect, and depression. In the United States, 16% of children live in poverty and approximately nine million children have no health insurance. Many children attend inadequate

and dangerous schools, and solid pre-school programs, such as Head Start, lack full funding. Children are one of the last priorities in decisions about budget cuts on the state and federal level; road maintenance and military budgets take precedence over our children, even though politicians pledge to “leave no child behind” in terms of health care or education.

Churches have not been consistent public advocates for children. Main-line Protestant churches support legislation to protect children’s health and safety, yet they hesitate to contribute significantly to public debates about strengthening families. Protestant evangelical and conservative churches, on the other hand, are more vocal in nationwide debates about marriage and the family. These churches

All children, whether biological or adopted, are “gifts” to us. They are God’s gifts not only to their parents, but also to the community, for they will grow up to be not only sons and daughters but also husbands, wives, friends, neighbors, and citizens.

sometimes focus so narrowly on the rights of parents to raise and educate their children without governmental intrusion, however, that they inadequately address the responsibilities of parents, church, and state to protect, educate, and support all children.

Even within our congregations, where we certainly care for children and have created beneficial programs for them, we often fail in our commitment to them. We witnessed this recently in the child sexual abuse cases within the Roman Catholic Church when financial concerns, careers of priests, and reputations of bishops or particular congregations came before the safety and needs of children. We exhibit lack of commitment to children in other, more subtle ways. For example, many congregations lack a strong religious education program for children: the lessons are theologically weak and uninteresting to children, and qualified teachers are not recruited and retained.

Many churches consider reflection on the moral and spiritual formation of children as “beneath” the work of their theologians and as a fitting area of inquiry only for pastoral counselors and religious educators. Consequently, systematic theologians and Christian ethicists say little about children, and there is no well-developed teaching on the nature of children or why we should care about and for them.¹ Although churches have highly developed teachings on related issues such as abortion, human sexuality, gender relations, and contraception, they do not offer sustained reflection on the nature of children or our obligations toward them. Children also do not play a role in the way that systematic theologians think about central theological themes, such as the nature of faith, language about God, and

the task of the church. Certainly, issues regarding children are addressed occasionally in theological reflection on the family. However, “For the most part, church teaching simply admonishes the parents to educate their children in the faith and for children to obey their parents.”²

Lurking behind our lack of commitment to children in the church and the wider culture are several simplistic views of children and our obligations to them. In a consumer culture, the “market mentality” molds our attitudes toward children as not having inherent worth, but as being commodities, consumers, or even economic burdens. Or, in another simplifying move, we view children as either all good or all bad; for instance, popular magazines or newspapers tend to depict infants and young children as pure and innocent beings whom we adore and teenagers as hidden and dark creatures whom we must fear. In the Christian tradition, we have often focused on children merely as sinful or as creatures who are ‘not yet fully human.’ These overly simple views diminish children’s complexity and intrinsic value, and thereby undermine our commitment and sense of obligation to them.

We can overcome these simplistic views by retrieving a richer picture of childhood from the Christian tradition. Although some theologians have expressed narrow and even destructive conceptions of children, there are six central ways of speaking about childhood that, when critically retrieved, can broaden our conception of children and strengthen our commitment to them. The Christian tradition represents children in complex, almost paradoxical ways, as *gifts of God and signs of God’s blessing*, though they are *sinful and selfish*; as *developing creatures in need of instruction and guidance*, yet as *fully human and made in the image of God*; and as *models of faith, sources of revelation, and representatives of Jesus*, though they be *orphans, neighbors, and strangers* who need to be treated with justice and integrity. These six central ways, taken together, present a complex picture of children that can provide a solid foundation for more creative religious education programs, more serious theological and ethical reflection on children, and renewed commitment to serving and protecting all children.

CHILDREN IN THE BIBLE AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The Bible often depicts children as *gifts of God and signs of God’s blessing*. Children are sources of joy and pleasure, who ultimately come from God and belong to God. The Psalmist says children are a “heritage” from the Lord and a “reward” (Psalm 127:3). Leah, Jacob’s first wife, speaks of her sixth son as a dowry, or wedding gift, presented by God (Genesis 30:20). Parents who receive these precious gifts are being “remembered” by God (Genesis 30:22; 1 Samuel 1:11, 19) and given “good fortune” (Genesis 30:11); to be “fruitful” with children is to receive God’s blessing.³

All children, whether biological or adopted, are “gifts” to us; they are greater than our own making, and they will develop in ways we cannot

imagine or control. Scientists are still exploring the mysteries surrounding conception; even with great advances in reproductive technology, we still do not understand and cannot control all of the factors that allow for conception and a full-term pregnancy. There is wonder and mystery, too, in the process of adoption.

Children, we should remember, are God's gifts not only to their parents, but also to the community. They will grow up to be not only sons and daughters but also husbands, wives, friends, neighbors, and citizens.

In addition to saying that children are gifts and signs of God's blessing, the Bible and the tradition speak of them as sources of joy and pleasure. Abraham and Sarah rejoice at the birth of their son, Isaac. Even in his terror and anguish, Jeremiah recalls the story that news of his own birth once made his father, Hilkiyah, "very glad" (Jeremiah 20:15). An angel promises Zechariah and Elizabeth that their child will bring them "joy and gladness" (Luke 1:14). "When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come," Jesus notes, "But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world" (John 16:20-21). Parents in the past perhaps wanted children for reasons we do not always emphasize today, to perpetuate the nation or to ensure someone would care for them in their old age. Nevertheless, there is a sense today and in the past that one of the great blessings of our interactions with children is simply the joy and pleasure we take in them.

Christian tradition often describes children as *sinful creatures and moral agents*. "The whole nature" of children, Calvin says, is a "seed of sin; thus it cannot be but hateful and abominable to God."⁴ Johann Arndt claims that within children lies hidden "an evil root" of a poisonous tree and "an evil seed of the serpent."⁵ Jonathan Edwards writes that as innocent as even infants appear to be, "if they are out of Christ, they are not so in God's sight, but are young vipers, and are infinitely more hateful than vipers."⁶

This view is based on several biblical texts. For example, we read that every inclination of the human heart is "evil from youth" (Genesis 8:21) and that folly is "bound up in the heart" of children (Proverbs 22:15). The Psalms declare that we are sinful at birth and that "the wicked go astray from the womb; they err from their birth" (Psalms 51:5; 58:3). All people are "under the power of sin," the Apostle Paul writes, so "there is no one who is righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:9-10; cf. 5:12).

On the surface, this way of thinking about children can seem negative and destructive. What good does it do to speak about children, especially infants, as sinful? Isn't this view of children hopelessly out of touch with contemporary psychological conceptions of children that emphasize their potential for development and need for loving nurture? Doesn't this emphasis on sin lead automatically to the harsh and even brutal treatment of children?

Certainly, in some cases, viewing children as sinful has led to their se-

vere treatment and even abuse. Recent studies of the religious roots of child abuse show how the view of children as sinful or depraved, particularly in some strains of European and American Protestantism, has led Christians to emphasize that parents need to “break their wills” at a very early age with harsh physical punishment. This kind of emphasis on the depravity of children has led, in some cases, to the physical abuse and even death of children, including infants.

Although this abuse and even milder forms of physical punishment must be rejected, and although viewing them exclusively as sinful often has warped Christian approaches to children, the notion that children are sinful is worth revisiting and critically retrieving. There are three helpful aspects of the notion that children are sinful that we must keep in mind if we are going to avoid narrow and destructive views of children.

First, when we say children are sinful, we are saying that they are born into a “state of sin,” into a world that is not what it ought to be. Their parents are not perfectly loving and just; social institutions that support them, such as schools and governments, are not free from corruption; and communities in which they live, no matter how safe, have elements of injustice and violence. All levels of human relationships are not the way they ought to be. Furthermore, in addition to the brokenness of relationships and institutions in which they are born, human beings find a certain kind of brokenness within themselves. As we grow, develop, and become more conscious of our actions, we see how easy it is for us either to be self-centered or to place inordinate importance on the approval of others.

When we say children are sinful, we are also saying that they carry out “actual sins,” that they are moral agents who sometimes act in ways that are self-centered and harmful to themselves and others. We are taking into account a child’s capacity to accept some degree of responsibility for harmful actions. These “actual sins” (against others or oneself) have their root in the “state of sin” and a failure to center our lives on the divine. Instead of being firmly grounded in the “infinite” that is greater than ourselves, our lives become centered on “finite” goals and achievements, such as career success, material gain, our appearance, or the approval of others around us. When this happens, it is easy for us to become excessively focused on ourselves; we lose the ability to love our neighbors as ourselves and to act justly and fairly. This view of “actual sins” of children becomes distorted when theologians mistakenly equate a child’s physical and emotional needs or early developmental stages with sin. However, when used cautiously and with attention to psychological insights into child development, it can also strengthen our awareness of a child’s growing moral capacities and levels of accountability.

Although it is important to recognize that children are born in a state of sin and are moral beings capable of actual sins against God and others, a

third important aspect of the notion that children are sinful, emphasized by many theologians in the tradition, is that infants and young children are not as sinful as adults and therefore do not need as much help to love God and the neighbor. They have not gotten into bad habits or developed negative thoughts and feelings that reinforce destructive behaviors. The positive way of expressing the same idea is that young people are more easily

The many biblical instructions to treat orphans, neighbors, and strangers with justice and compassion throw a strong light on our responsibility to help all children in need, especially poor children who are among the most vulnerable members of society. Caring for these children surely is part of seeking justice and loving our neighbors.

formed than adults, and it is easier to nurture them and set them on a straight path. This is one reason that most theologians who have emphasized that children are sinful have never concluded that children should be physically punished or treated inhumanely. Rather, they view them as “tender plants” that need gentle and loving guidance and care instead of harsh treatment.

A third central perspective within the tradition is

that children are *developing beings who need instruction and guidance*. Because children are “on their way” to becoming adults, they need nurture and guidance from adults to help them develop intellectually, morally, and spiritually. They need to learn the basic skills of reading, writing, and thinking critically. They also need to be taught what is right and just and to develop particular virtues and habits that enable them to behave properly, to develop friendships, and to contribute to the common good.

The Bible encourages adults to guide and nurture children. Adults are to “train children in the right way” (Proverbs 22:6) and bring up children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Parents and caring adults should tell children about God’s faithfulness (Isaiah 38:19) and “the glorious deeds of the Lord” (Psalm 78:4b). They are to teach children the words of the law (Deuteronomy 11:18-19; 31:12-13), the love of God alone (Deuteronomy 6:7), and what is right, just, and fair (Genesis 18:19; Proverbs 2:9).

We might say that adults are to attend to the “whole being” of children and provide them with emotional, intellectual, moral, and spiritual guidance. Thus, in addition to providing children with a good education and teaching them skills that are necessary to earn a living and raise a family, adults are to instruct children about the faith and help them develop moral sensibilities, character, and virtue so that they can love God and love the

neighbor with justice and compassion.

Although children are developing, they are, at the same time, *whole and complete human beings made in the image of God*. This sometimes neglected theme within the Christian tradition helps to avoid mistreatment of children by reminding us they are worthy of respect and dignity. Because “Childhood is not merely the prelude to adulthood,” Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Johnson note, “the child already has the value and depth of full humanity.”⁷ Recognizing the full humanity of children is the first step toward treating all children with respect. The Bible teaches that God made humankind in the image of God (Genesis 1:27); thus, all children, regardless of race, gender, or class, are fully human and worthy of respect.

The New Testament depicts children in striking and even radical ways as *moral witnesses, models of faith for adults, sources or vehicles of revelation, and representatives of Jesus*. In the gospels we see Jesus embracing children and rebuking those who would turn them away, healing them, and even lifting them up as models of faith. He identifies himself with children and equates welcoming a little child in his name to welcoming himself and the one who sent him. “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus warns. “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:2-5). He adds, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Matthew 19:14).⁸

These perspectives on children continue to be as striking today as they were in Jesus’ time. In the first century, children occupied a low position in society, abandonment was not a crime, and children were not put forward as models for adults.⁹ Even today, we rarely emphasize what adults can learn from children.

Finally, the many biblical passages that instruct us to treat *orphans, neighbors, and strangers* with justice and compassion throw a strong light on our responsibility to help all children in need, especially poor children who are among the most vulnerable members of society. Caring for these children surely is part of seeking justice and loving our neighbors.¹⁰

THE CHURCH’S COMMITMENT TO CHILDREN TODAY

Whenever we retreat from this rich, complex view of children found in the Bible and Christian tradition, and we focus instead on only one or two aspects of what children are, we risk falling into deficient understandings of our obligations to children. We risk treating them in inadequate and harmful ways.

Consider what happens when we view children only as gifts of God and as models of faith. Though we will enjoy children and learn from them, we may neglect their moral responsibilities and minimize the role that parents and other caring adults should play in a child’s moral develop-

ment. In the end, we may adopt a “hands off” approach to parenting that underestimates the responsibilities of both adults and children. Some Christians today emphasize the innocence and wisdom of children, but fail to articulate the full range of adult responsibilities to children, as well as a child’s own growing moral capacities.

On the other hand, if we view children primarily as sinful and in need of instruction, then we will emphasize the role of parents and other caring adults in guiding and instructing children, and will recognize a child’s own moral responsibilities. However, we may neglect to learn from children, delight in them, and be open to what God reveals to us through them. Furthermore, we may narrowly restrict our understanding of parenting to instruction, discipline, and punishment. This approach, which is found in milder and more extreme forms throughout church history, is in some parenting manuals written by Christians today. Some continue to reason that because children are sinful, parents should literally “beat the devil” out of them. Even when such books emphasize the kind treatment of children, their focus on a child’s sinful nature presents narrow views of children, child-parent relationships, and communal obligations toward children.

Let us avoid these kinds of inadequate approaches to children in the culture and the church by appropriating all six biblical perspectives of children. By keeping all six in mind, we are bound to strengthen our relationships to children, reflect more seriously on our obligations toward them, and develop a more meaningful commitment to them.

When we truly perceive children as gifts of God and sources of joy, then we will be more grateful for them and enjoy them. We will not see them as “belonging” to their parents, but rather as gifts to them and the whole community.

A view of children as sinful creatures and moral agents will help us to recognize and cultivate their growing moral capacities and responsibilities.

If we see children as developing beings in need of instruction, then we are bound to guide and teach them more intentionally. We will support full and whole educational opportunities for all children in the society. Further, we will develop more substantial religious educational materials and programs for children in the church.

When we view children as made in the image of God and as fully human, we will treat all of them, regardless of age, race, class, or gender, with more dignity and respect. As a society, we will provide the resources they need to thrive, including proper nutrition and adequate health care.

If we truly believe, as Jesus did, that children can teach adults and be moral witnesses, models of faith, and sources of revelation, then we will listen more attentively to them and will learn from them. We will structure our religious education programs in ways that honor their questions and insights, and we will recognize the importance of children in the faith journey and spiritual maturation of adults.

Once we realize that children are among the orphans, neighbors, and strangers that the Bible commands us to love and care for, then we will work more diligently to protect and serve all children in need. We will become stronger and more creative advocates for children in our country and around the world.

In these and other ways, a complex and biblically-informed understanding of children combats simplistic and destructive conceptions of them. This more vibrant theology of children prompts us to take up more wholeheartedly and responsibly the Christian call to care for all children.

NOTES

1 See Todd David Whitmore with Tobias Winright, "Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching," in *The Challenge of Global Stewardship*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Todd David Whitmore (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 161-85. Whitmore's claims about the Catholic Church can be applied to Christian theology in general.

2 Whitmore, "Children," 162.

3 See, for example, Genesis 17:16, 28:3, and 49:25; Exodus 23:25-26; Deuteronomy 7:13-14, 28:11, and 30:9; Job 5:25; Psalm 127:3-5 and 128:3-4. See several other biblical references to children as "gifts" in Roy B. Zuck, *Precious in His Sight: Childhood and Children in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 49.

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 97. Quoted by Barbara Pitkin, "'The Heritage of the Lord': Children In the Theology of John Calvin," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 167.

5 Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, trans. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 34-35.

6 Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival* (1742), in *The Great Awakening*, edited by C. C. Goen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 394. Quoted by Katherine Brekus, "Children of Wrath, Children of Grace: Jonathan Edwards and the Puritan Culture of Child Rearing," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 303.

7 Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 9.

8 Some of the most significant passages in the gospels are Mark 9:33-37, Luke 9:46-48, Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 10:13-16, Matthew 19:13-15, Luke 18:15-17; Matthew 11:25 and 21:14-16. For discussion of these and other passages in the New Testament, see Judith Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament" in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 29-60.

9 Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest," 39.

10 See, for example, Exodus 22:22-24, Deuteronomy 10:17-18 and 14:28-29.



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Living in the Shadow of the Manger

BY MARGARET ELETTA GUIDER, O.S.F.

How might our theological vision be enriched by reflecting as much on the fragility of the newborn Infant as the vulnerability of the Crucified One? When the shadow of the Manger falls across our lives with a power similar to the shadow of the Cross, we will commit ourselves to respond to the particular needs and suffering of children.

For centuries Christian moral imagination has been informed by experiences and interpretations of living in the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ. It is the most influential paradigm for Christian living. It informs our ways of making meaning of our lives, our world, and our faith in both ordinary and extraordinary times.

How might our theological vision be enriched if we were to give as much consideration to reflection on the fragility of the newborn Infant as the vulnerability of the Crucified One? How do the life-threatening circumstances that lead the Infant into exile compare with the life-threatening circumstances that lead to the arrest, trial, and death of the Crucified One? How might such reflection enlarge our sense of social responsibility? What if we were to allow the shadow of the Manger to fall across our lives with a power and intensity similar to the shadow of the Cross? Might seeing the realities of our world from the perspective of Bethlehem compel us to consciously commit ourselves to responding to the particular needs and suffering of children? Using these questions as a starting point, I would like to expand the theological horizons from which we as adults take inspiration and sustenance for our lives as followers of Jesus and advocates for the children entrusted to our care.

I find myself coming to an unsettling awareness about the resolve of adult Christians to recognize and serve the needs of children (a category in which I include youngsters, infants, and the unborn) entrusted to our care. We seem to be lacking the desire, the will, or the ability to retrieve and to hand on the theological resources of our tradition that would guide us toward faithful action on behalf of our young sisters and brothers. Precisely at a time in human history when the realities of abortion, hunger, poverty, neglect, homelessness, loss of identity, abuse, corruption, and war are more often a rule of life than an exception, the state of the world's children calls into question the degree to which Christian communities are being all that they can be *with and for* children.

The more I ponder this, the more I am convinced that one of the key reasons for our troubling limitations and inadequacies may be traced to our reliance on the mystery of the cross for identifying, diagnosing, triaging, treating, and explaining the sources and symptoms of all human suffering and sin. My intention is not to diminish the centrality of the passion, crucifixion, and death of Jesus in the life of every Christian. Nevertheless, in terms of witness and proclamation, I do believe that the times in which we live demand of us a more differentiated understanding of the suffering of Christ as well as that of humanity. In addition to focusing on the mystery of the Crucifixion, on living in the shadow of the cross, we should testify in these times to the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Resurrection as well. Certainly we must embody in our daily life and practice the belief that our *Savior* Jesus Christ suffers for us and for our sins. But we must also give expression to the belief that he is *Emmanuel*, God-with-Us, the One who came among us as child, and that this same Jesus Christ is truly our *Risen Lord*, who has broken the chains of death and set us free.¹

For far too long, our moral imaginations have been limited because we have overlooked, forgotten, or hidden the theological foundations and ethical imperatives associated with "living in the shadow of the manger."

THE PASSION OF THE INFANT CHRIST

In the aftermath of World War II, the English author Caryll Houselander published a thought-provoking book entitled *The Passion of the Infant Christ*. "Bethlehem," she wrote, "is the inscape of Calvary.... The Passion of the Man Christ on Calvary is at once revealed and hidden in the Infant Christ in Bethlehem."² By exploring some fascinating parallels between the Manger and the Cross, the Christ Child and the Christ Man, and Bethlehem and Calvary, she disclosed the significance of the suffering of the Infant as well as the Crucified One. In doing so, Houselander also focused adult attention to the particular needs and sufferings of children.

During the Cold War era the United Nations became conscious of the wide-spread suffering of children throughout the world and concluded that the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, advanced in 1949 to promote

human dignity, well-being, and rights in general, had largely failed to recognize and enforce the special rights to which every child is entitled. In 1959 the United Nations drafted the *Declaration on the Rights of the Child*, setting forth ten principles in defense of every child's need for special safeguards, including appropriate legal protection, before and after birth.³

Houselander's considerations of the Manger challenged me to reflect seriously upon the particular suffering of the Christ Child in ways that I

To respond appropriately to the needs of children, we must prayerfully reflect on the suffering of the Christ Child with the same seriousness as that of the Christ Man.

had never done before. In a similar fashion, my initial discovery of the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of the Child* required me to reflect seriously on the distinctiveness of the needs and rights of children. Thanks to these two important points of refer-

ence, the direction of my theological inquiry took an unexpected turn. I found myself wrestling with this haunting question: *Can a Christian community whose theological horizon is primarily informed by a theology of the cross respond adequately and appropriately to the particular needs and claims of children?*

The more I ponder the question, the more it becomes clear to me that it cannot be answered "Yes." To respond in the negative, however, requires me to answer this deeper question: how might we supply for what is lacking? In other words, how might we engage in the kind of theological reflection that would benefit the children of our world? I recommend the following three strategies: (1) to prayerfully reflect upon the suffering undergone by the Christ Child with the same seriousness as that of the Christ Man, (2) to discover ways of allowing our prayerful reflection to stir our Christian consciences, and (3) to read the Word in the world as it is revealed in and through the lives of children who suffer.

To provide a framework for prayerful reflection for use by Christians both individually and in communities, I have adapted and synthesized a number of Houselander's parallels⁴ and set them to correspond with the principles of the *Declaration on the Rights of the Child* in the form of guided meditations. Admittedly, the framework has its limitations. Nevertheless, as a means for inspiring prayer, guiding reflection, stimulating discussion, and raising further questions, I believe the framework accomplishes its objective of inviting and leading adult Christians to consider the theological and ethical implications of living in the shadow of the Manger.

A FRAMEWORK FOR PRAYERFUL REFLECTION

In each meditation, prayerfully reflect from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and on the condition of children today.

Ask God for discernment of our responsibilities as adult Christians to care for children in our congregations, our immediate communities, and in the larger world.



MEDITATION ON LIFE

From the perspective of the Cross: Consider Christ, his life threatened by those who want him dead, approaching the hour of his passion, riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey.

From the perspective of the Manger: Consider the unborn Infant, in Mary's pregnant womb, approaching the hour of his birth, as they are carried into Bethlehem on the back of a donkey.

On the condition of children today: Consider the unborn and at-risk children of our world. Consider how every child is entitled to life. Consider the Christian commitment to defend life.

MEDITATION ON AFFECTION AND SECURITY

Cross: Consider Christ on Calvary, sleeping his last sleep in his mother's arms.

Manger: Consider the newborn Infant in Bethlehem, sleeping his first sleep in his mother's arms.

Children: Consider children, alive or lifeless, who will be held in the arms of their mothers this day. Consider how every child is entitled to an atmosphere of affection and security. Consider the Christian commitment to care for mothers and children.

MEDITATION ON NAME

Cross: Consider the identification of Christ as "King of the Jews" and the ways in which this naming shaped the course of his life and ultimately cost him his life.

Manger: Consider the Infant who, from the time of his conception is called Jesus, who from the time of his birth is identified as the infant king of the Jews, a naming that not only threatens his life, but endangers the lives of other children as well.

Children: Consider the importance of ensuring that a child has a name, an identity, a birth certificate, a passport, a sense of belonging. Consider how every child is entitled to a name and nationality. Consider the Christian commitment to children whose lack of registration or documentation denies them a family identity, legal rights, or immigration status.

MEDITATION ON PERSONAL SAFETY

Cross: Consider Christ on Calvary, betrayed and abandoned by his followers, stripped of his garments and all that he owned, and made

poor by the forces of evil, oppression, and domination.

Manger: Consider the Infant in Bethlehem, soon to become a refugee in Egypt, displaced as he is deprived of the cradle prepared for him in Nazareth, and made poor by the historical circumstances of politics and culture.

Children: Consider children who are abandoned or abused, forced into exile as refugees, unprotected as orphans. Consider how every child is entitled to personal safety and social security. Consider the Christian commitment to at-risk children locally and globally.

MEDITATION ON CARE FOR SPECIAL NEEDS

Cross: Consider Christ on Calvary, laid upon a wooden cross, set between two thieves, and stretched, straightened, and fastened down.

Manger: Consider the Infant in Bethlehem, laid in a wooden manger, set in the midst of animals, and stretched out, straightened, and fastened in swaddling clothes.

Children: Consider children with disabilities, life-threatening illnesses, and chronic conditions. Consider how every child is entitled to special care for special needs. Consider the Christian commitment to children with special needs and their families.

MEDITATION ON PROVISION OF HUMAN SERVICES

Cross: Consider how Christ was crucified outside the city wall, as Mary, his mother, powerless and helpless, stood by the cross of her son.

Manger: Consider how the Infant was born outside of his own village and crowded out of the inns of Bethlehem, was born in a stable as Mary and Joseph knelt by the manger where he was laid.

Children: Consider children who are denied access to human services and who experience exclusion from safe housing, day care, schools, hospitals, and playgrounds. Consider how every child is entitled to the special protection of the child's best interests. Consider the Christian commitment to children on the margins of society as well as their desperate parents.

MEDITATION ON EDUCATION AND RECREATION

Cross: Consider how Christ, shortly after his arrest, was questioned by the chief priests and Sanhedrin about his disciples and his teaching.

Manger: Consider how the Child was presented in the Temple in Jerusalem, and as an older boy was found sitting in the Temple among the teachers.

Children: Consider children who do not have access to educational opportunities and activities that will enrich their lives. Consider how every child is entitled to an education and recreation. Consider the Christian commitment to ensure the well-being of children through education and play.

MEDITATION ON RECOGNITION AND ASSISTANCE

Cross: Consider how Christ on Calvary was tortured and held as a helpless captive, while observed by witnesses, hostile bystanders, and Roman soldiers.

Manger: Consider how the Infant in Bethlehem, a fragile and dependent newborn, was visited by peasant shepherds and sought out by foreign royalty.

Children: Consider the significance for children of outside recognition and assistance from adults other than their parents and relatives. Consider how every child is entitled to be raised in an atmosphere of peace, dignity, and freedom. Consider the Christian commitment to solidarity with and care for children and their families.

MEDITATION ON PROTECTION FROM CRUELTY

Cross: Consider how Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate and how his followers survived to tell the story.

Manger: Consider how the Infant's life was threatened by Herod and how, while surviving in exile, the lives of numerous innocent children were destroyed in his place.

Children: Consider the indignities, injustices, and martyrdoms that children suffer at the hands of adults who often carry out their cruelty with impunity. Consider how every child is entitled to protection from cruelty. Consider the Christian commitment to prevent and protect children from all forms of cruelty and endangerment.

MEDITATION ON PRIORITY OF CHILDREN

Cross: Consider the spikenard and ointment that were poured out for Christ in Bethany in anticipation of his death.

Manger: Consider the gold, myrrh, and frankincense that were poured out for the Infant by the Magi who journeyed to visit him at Bethlehem.

Children: Consider the needs of children for comfort, compassion, and concern as they anticipate and face difficulties in their young lives. Consider how every child is entitled to be among the first to receive protection and relief. Consider the Christian commitment to make the well-being of children the highest priority of the congregation.

**STIRRING THE CONSCIENCES OF ADULT CHRISTIANS**

Beyond prayerful reflection, what are the consequences of this framework of analysis for congregations concerned about the spiritual and social welfare of children?

The framework requires us to be attentive to the mystery of the Incarnation in all of its dimensions. Not only should we wonder, "Why did God

become human?" for embedded in that question are related questions: "Why did God come as infant?" and "Of what real significance are the infancy narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke?"

Ethically speaking, the framework requires us to beware of the limitations of our adult-centric worldviews and the inadequacies of our trickle-down social theories that discount, minimize, or disregard the fact that

In becoming human God chose to be conceived by and born of a woman—to take on the fragility of the human condition as the Living Christ yet unborn, as the Infant Christ in need of affection and protection, and as the Christ Child impressionable and growing up in a dangerous world.

children are more than miniature adults, potential adults, or extensions of adults. In their "thisness" children are not only who they may become in the future, but who they are in the present just as God has created them to be—persons in time. Their needs and experiences parallel those of adults; however, there is a qualitative difference. Though suffering is a part of every human existence, no one can bear to

see an infant or child suffer, not even the infant or child of an enemy. To think differently is to slip down toward one's own dehumanization.

The framework also challenges Christian congregations to reassess their suspicions about the ideological motivations and political agendas associated with the United Nations. Surely some gospel value is witnessed by our upholding the aspects of *Rights of the Child* that can be supported and strengthened by Christian churches and church-based non-governmental organizations. When it comes to taking seriously the *Rights of the Child*, throwing the metaphorical baby out with the bath water is not an acceptable strategy for Christians whose vested interest in following Jesus requires pursuing all that is truly in the best interests of children. In the religiously pluralistic, post-modern world in which children all too easily become pawns in the power plays of adult decision makers (political, economic, cultural, and religious), the cost of Christian stewardship requires us to take a long hard look at the many scandals that exacerbate the suffering of the children entrusted by God to our care (Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:1-2).

READING THE WORD IN THE WORLD

The Second Person of the Trinity, who could have chosen to beam aboard planet Earth, either adopting, materializing, or simply appearing to have the human body of a thirty-something adult, chose instead the way of

incarnation as a child. That is the major theological insight of a theology of the Manger. In becoming human, God chose to be conceived by and born of a woman. God chose to enter into creation, taking on not only our humanity, but the fragility and dependency of the human condition as the Living Christ yet unborn, as the Infant Christ in need of affection and protection, and as the Christ Child impressionable and growing up in a dangerous world. God's choice to share in the passion of human infancy was a choice to undergo the sufferings that are a part of being human. Moreover, the choice involved God entrusting God's self to the care, concern, and solicitude of human persons—inviting Mary, compelling Joseph, fascinating shepherds, amazing Magi, comforting Anna and Simeon, and unsettling Herod.

The Infant did not make disciples. Rather, the Infant called forth from human persons the goodness in and for which they were created. The Infant reminded those who surrounded him that they had been called to participate in God's mission by being mindful and attentive to the dependency of His human condition. The Infant trusted that men, women, and children would respond freely to the invitation to be his stewards and his ministers. The condition to which they responded was not extraordinary, but rather one with which they were familiar, having experienced their own infancies and childhoods, as well as times of illness, disability, personal vulnerability, and dying.

The suffering of the Infant Christ and, indeed, the suffering of every child, reminds us that God assumed this condition. And it is in this condition that God entrusted his very self to our care, protection, and loving service. In doing so, God dignified and sanctified the dependent interdependency of our human condition.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to tease out some important insights that we may overlook as long as we identify the suffering of Jesus Christ only with that of the Crucified Christ-Man. At first glance, setting in correspondence selected gospel themes with principles articulated in the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of the Child* may seem a bit forced, contrived, or artificial. Nonetheless, such a framework provides a thought-provoking means for exploring a few key insights for Christian communities who take up the challenge to recover and be formed by the infancy narratives, not only during Christmastide, but during ordinary time as well. How might our Christian moral imagination be illumined by the suffering of the Christ-Child? Though my proposal is not the only way to engage the question, it is one way of keeping us mindful of the theological mystery and moral implications of a God who dared to entrust his infant self to our care.

Daring to live in the shadow of the Manger invites us to a new and unusual way of understanding the fragility, dignity, and uniqueness of the

human person created in the image and likeness of God. It invites us to a new way of recognizing, loving, protecting, and serving the Christ who lives in every infant and child, and indeed, in every person. Finally, it invites us to both distinguish and make the connections between the suffering of the One who as an infant assumed our dependently human condition and thereby taught us to embrace Love, and the suffering of the One who as an adult suffered and triumphed over the forces of evil and the powers of hell that conspired to destroy Love. In the light of such differentiation, our *response to* and our *identification with* the sufferings of Christ are given new meaning and new consequence.

NOTES

1 Ideally, we should explore the broader interactions of manger, cross, and empty tomb. Here I explore only the lessons we can learn about human suffering and solidarity with children by drawing parallels between a theology of the cross and a theology of the manger.

2 Caryll Houselander, *The Passion of the Infant Christ* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1949), 55.

3 United Nations General Assembly, *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, Resolution 1386 (XIV) of 20 November 1959.

4 *Passion of the Infant Christ*, 60-65.



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Beyond Noah's Ark

BY SUSAN R. GARRETT

We want to tell our children the ancient stories of promise, deliverance, human failure, and divine forgiveness and fidelity so that they, too, may come to “love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and strength.” But just how do we go about imparting to them a deep knowledge of Scripture?

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

After Moses delivered the Ten Commandments, he instructed the people on how to live in devotion to the Lord. Above all they must love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and strength. They must keep the commandments and *teach them to their children*. And when the children ask, in future years, about the meaning of the decrees and statutes and ordinances, then the people must tell their children the story of the Exodus: “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...” (Deuteronomy 6:21).

As Christian parents, grandparents, and caregivers, we too want to teach the holy words to our children. We want to tell them the ancient stories of promise, deliverance, human failure, and divine forgiveness and fidelity so that they, too, may come to “love the Lord with all their heart,

soul, and strength." But just *how* do we go about imparting to them a deep knowledge of Scripture? The temptation is to leave this task to "the experts" at Sunday school or a week of vacation Bible school. But kids' opportunity to develop knowledge of and love for the Bible will be much greater if not only church teachers but also parents, grandparents, and daily caregivers show and tell them how to live with Scripture as a lamp to light the way.

Keeping a regular time for family devotions is a great way to foster love for the Bible and devotion to the Lord. But there are impediments to such a practice, including schedules with no room to breathe and our fears as adults that we don't know enough about the Bible to teach our children well. A more subtle hindrance is our desire to *control* kids' exposure to the Bible—to shield young readers from things in Scripture that may harm them, and to ensure that every passage is presented with a neatly packaged moral.

THE TIME CRUNCH

Numerous activities compete for a slot on kids' daily planners. Or is it the parents whose planners are the problem? When I lead workshops on daily devotions with children, adults typically mention the time-crunch as their greatest concern. On weekdays the kids' afternoon and evening hours fly, with extracurricular activities, homework, dinner, and bedtime routines each claiming precious minutes. And if it happens that the kids are unscheduled, then the parents are frantic, trying to keep lives and household organized and jobs on track. "How," you may be asking, "can I squeeze any more moments out of each day?"

The time is there but you will have to work to find it, or to make it. Do you eat together as a family at least a few evenings per week? Then read and reflect as a family on a passage of Scripture before you say grace. Are bedtime stories a part of the nightly ritual with one or more of your children? Then make one of your readings each night a passage from the Bible. Some parents tell me that they gather for family devotions each morning, but I cannot imagine this working at my own house, given the weekday press just to get everyone out the door on time.

Take heart from the fact that you don't need to find large chunks of time. Even ten minutes each day, offered consistently, can take you and your family into the heart of Scripture. And don't be discouraged if you can't make it a time for the *whole* family: start one-on-one with a single child if that is what you can manage. Think of your minutes together as "planting time": you are planting and watering seeds of faith; God will give the growth (1 Corinthians 3:7). Once the seeds have sprouted, you may find that God-talk also happens readily at other times throughout your days: while riding with your children in the car, reflecting on a TV news report or an incident at school, or discussing a routine matter like

recycling or feeding the family pet. Look for ways to help your kids make connections between the Bible and what is happening in their lives. Don't suppose, however, that you will be the only one talking! Kids are natural-born theologians. It is their business to wonder why things are the way they are. Given a little encouragement and a steady diet of Scripture's stories, hymns, instructions, poems, and prophecies, children will see God in places that will astound and delight you.

THE QUESTIONS KIDS ASK!

Many adults don't know the Bible well enough to feel confident teaching it to others. They are also intimidated by kids' questions, which can go to the very heart of hard theological topics like the universality of God's love ("Does God love terrorists?"), the meaning of Jesus' resurrection and the finality of death ("If God raised Jesus, then why does Grandpa have to stay dead?"), and the reliability of Scripture ("Why does the Bible say that God created sea monsters?").

If you do not know the Bible very well, there is good news: you don't have to know it all *today*, or even *tomorrow*—in fact the Bible is so wide and so deep that you will never reach the end of it, even if you read every word. Start with a single book of the Bible and move outward, learning with your children as you go. Or try using a devotional guide for children to help your family keep to a routine of daily Bible-reading and prayer. *Making Time for God: Daily Devotions for Children and Families to Share*, which I co-authored with Amy Plantinga Pauw (theologian, seminary colleague, friend, and fellow-mom) is a devotional guide that leads kids through better-known and also many lesser-known passages of Scripture, each accompanied by a meditation and short prayer to help stimulate family reflection and discussion.¹ Your pastor or church educator may suggest other devotional guides, as well as study Bibles and other resources for you to deepen your own knowledge of Scripture.

While on the topic of devotional materials, let me offer a word of caution: children's "story Bibles," which include collections of Bible stories (re-told, rather than excerpted directly from the Bible), are not "the real thing." To be sure, story Bibles have their place: they help those who don't know where to locate particular stories in the Bible, and their illustrations may capture the attention of younger readers. But such collections always go beyond what is written, supplying a particular interpreter's additions to and explanations of the biblical accounts. Moreover, story Bibles leave out some of the best parts of Scripture, usually those passages or books that do not readily adapt to "story"-format (the psalms and New Testament epistles, for example). So, use a "real Bible" with your children at least some of the time. Be sure to use a kid-friendly translation, such as the NIV (New International readers' Version), the CEV (Contemporary English Version), or the NLT (New Living Translation). Explain to your

children how the Bible is put together: what is meant by “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” for example, and where to find the table of contents for each. Whenever you read a passage, tell them what book you are reading from and offer a little information about when or where it was written (information readily available in any good study Bible). By doing so, you will help them learn to see the Bible as familiar territory, even home turf, rather than as a foreign land.

Your children will ask you questions about faith that will stump you. As parents, however, giving a wrong answer is not such a great risk. There are other, greater risks: the risk that by avoiding our children's questions we will convey that home is not the place to discuss serious matters, and the risk that our sons and daughters might miss the grand opportunity to live as children and friends of God. By making time for God in our daily family life, we say that knowing and trusting God are vital matters—that the Bible and the traditions of our faith teach us how to live. By hearing our children's questions, trying to answer them, and letting them know that we also value *their* opinion, we teach that the endeavor of bringing our lives into the light of Scripture is a crucially important one.² Love—our love for our children (attested by our spending time with them) and our love for Scripture—will cover a multitude of factual and interpretive errors. Stephanie Paulsell, now a professor of theology at Harvard, writes,

When I was a little girl, I used to read psalms every day with my father. He reads six psalms a day and writes down one verse from each in a little notebook, whatever strikes his heart on a particular day. I used to sit in the backyard with him and talk about which verses we might write down. I loved the feeling of handling those holy words with my dad as a child.³

That is what we want to give to our kids: a sense that handling these words is both a privilege and a great source of joy!

BEYOND NOAH'S ARK

Are there parts of Scripture that are inappropriate for children? For younger kids, the answer is “yes.” Some passages of Scripture are X-rated, mostly for violence, including sexual violence. I would not, for example, teach children the story of the gang-rape and murder of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19). But not all the difficult stories can be readily by-passed: some of *the most central stories* of Jewish and Christian tradition are also profoundly frightening or brutal. These include, for example, the account of the Passover with its slaughter of firstborn males, the story of Abraham's call to sacrifice Isaac, and the story of Jesus' crucifixion. Recently a mother of a three-year-old asked me, “What do I do about Easter this year? I feel I ought to tell my son about the crucifixion, but he doesn't even understand death yet. Won't it harm him to hear such a terrible story?” I

didn't tell her what to do, but in general I think that we ought not to shield our kids too much.

Shielding kids is a hard habit to overcome, as Christian educator Gretchen Wolff Pritchard notes:

For children, the virtually unanimous witness of religious publishing and our own cultural conditioning is to proclaim an easy Good News, especially for kids: a simple blessing, instead of a sacrament of life out of death. God's in his heaven, all's right with the world, is the message—and the only thing missing is that we all have to try harder to be loving.⁴

But the world is a violent place—a place where the forces of death and destruction often have the upper hand. Instead of crossing our fingers and hoping that nothing dreadful will happen too close to home, Pritchard urges us to accept “that our children are called to travel with us through the hard and bitter mystery of the creation as it actually is.”⁵ Our children need the *full* story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—not just the Easter joy but also Jesus' anointing at Bethany, his agony in Gethsemane, his being betrayed and then denied by his own, his silence before his judges, his pain and his sense of forsakenness on the cross. Our children need this story—and they need it earlier than we think.

Indeed, they need many stories. Newberry Award-winning children's author Katherine Paterson tells of growing up in China as the daughter of missionaries. Her parents read and re-read the stories of the Bible to their children “not to make us good but to tell us who we were.” She comments, “It is still hard for me to accept as fact that my blood ancestors were gentiles.... My

real ancestors left Ur of the Chaldeans with Abraham and wandered in the wilderness with Moses.”⁶ The Bible gives us our identity by stretching our sense of time (from the dawn of creation to the end of the age) and our sense of family (not just blood relatives but countless brothers and sisters in faith). The Bible helps us understand what it means to be human: fallen and living in a fallen world, but beloved, and ever with reason for

When children ask questions about faith which stump you, giving a wrong answer is not such a great risk. The greater risks are that by avoiding our children's questions we will convey that home is not the place to discuss serious matters, and that our sons and daughters might miss the grand opportunity to live as children and friends of God.

hope. Why, then, do we so seldom go beyond the stories of Noah's ark, David and Goliath, and Jesus blessing the children? Wonderful as these stories are (God's annihilation of nearly the entire population of the earth notwithstanding), there is far more to tell. "What should we tell the children?" Paterson asks. Then she answers her own question: "Tell them the stories!"⁷

As adults who care for children we easily fall into supposing that we ought to control everything they think. One sees this tendency at work in many of the religious videos and curricular or devotional materials written for children. Authors seem often to suppose that their task is to identify a moral for each Bible story and offer not the story but the moral. Frequently these "biblical" messages are re-packaged as modern "morality tales," in which it is not Moses, Miriam, Joshua, Jesus, and Paul who act

The Bible helps us understand what it means to be human: fallen and living in a fallen world, but beloved, and ever with reason for hope. Why, then, do we so seldom go beyond the stories of Noah's ark, David and Goliath, and Jesus blessing the children? Wonderful as these stories are, there is far more to tell.

but fictitious modern children, who learn such bland lessons as "Don't lie," "Don't cheat," "Obey your parents," "Witness to your friends," "Be nice to the lonely kid at school." Thus the stories of the Bible cease to function as stories and become only mechanisms to deliver pre-measured doses of instruction.⁸ The Bible, like all great narratives, assists us in imagining a new and bigger world than the one we have previously known. To give the Bible to our children means allowing them to enter into that world and inhabit it for a time. We cannot control all that they will take away from the world of the Bible, but we can trust that they will be richer and more competent human beings because of what they encounter there.

My colleague Amy Plantinga Pauw compares the content-controlled fare of much children's religious instruction to a fast-food take-out meal: there are no surprises, and the fare is not very exciting or nutritious. The Bible, she suggests, is really more akin to a Thanksgiving feast: the table is loaded with far more food than we can eat. Some of the dishes are familiar, some not. Some are savory, others sweet, most are wholesome, and each is *someone's* favorite. Let us invite our children to the feast!

CONCLUSION

For Christian parents, grandparents, and caregivers, teaching our children to know and love the Bible is a duty *and* a privilege, an obligation *and*

a source of joy. Yet this need to instruct children in Scripture causes anxiety for many. The brief pointers that I have offered in this article are meant to help adults meet and overcome some of the more common obstacles to reading the Bible with children. My desire has been to encourage and inspire those who want the children in their lives to walk in the light that Scripture sheds.

Christian education professor J. Bradley Wigger stresses the importance of teaching the Bible to our children, but also points out that *all* of our ways of “being family” constitute our children’s spiritual training. “Showing love and kindness to our children, teaching them to seek justice and care for the vulnerable in society, letting them know that we, their parents, also bow before a God of mercy and goodness—these are the spiritual disciplines of parenting and the piety of home.”⁹ There is not one “right” formula for “being family”: *many* kinds of homes and *many* practices can embody the love, kindness, and reverence for God that children need. And so also there are many potential methods and opportunities to share Scripture with children. Find the practices that are right for you!

NOTES

1 Susan R. Garrett and Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Making Time for God: Daily Devotions for Children and Families to Share* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2002).

2 On these points, see the fine book by J. Bradley Wigger, *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing our Children in Love & Grace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 143-145.

3 From a personal communication. Used with permission.

4 Gretchen Wolff Pritchard, *Offering the Gospel to Children* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1992), 33.

5 Ibid.

6 Quoted in Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 62.

7 From a lecture delivered at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, March 4, 2003.

8 Cf. Pritchard, *Offering the Gospel*, 18.

9 Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 91-92.



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This photo is available in
the print version of *Children*.

“The carpenter’s son,” the people of Nazareth would call Jesus in later years. Surely Jesus was taught by his father Joseph the skills and wisdom learned from his own life as a carpenter.

*Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1656), CHILDHOOD OF CHRIST, c. 1620. Oil on canvas, 137 x 185 cm.
© The State Hermitage museum, St. Petersburg.*

Intently Watching

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The Gospel of Luke mentions just two stories about Jesus' childhood: his presentation in the temple as a newborn (Luke 2:22-39) and his visit to the temple for Passover when he was twelve years old (2:41-52; discussed in "In Her Heart," p. 53), which is the last time the gospels mention Joseph. "In their own town of Nazareth," Luke writes in summarizing those intervening, formative years of growth, "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (Luke 2:39b-40). We must assume, as the many writers of various legends and apocryphal stories throughout the later centuries did, that he was taught by his father Joseph the skills and wisdom learned from his own life as a carpenter. The people of Nazareth associated Jesus with his father: "Is not this Joseph's son?" and "Is not this the carpenter's son?" they wondered when Jesus spoke with prophetic wisdom in their synagogue (Luke 4:22 and Matthew 13:55).

Gerrit van Honthorst draws upon many sources for his painting. He maintains the visual tradition of depicting Joseph as an aged man rather than a peer of Mary, which was begun by Catholic sources.¹ Scripture only hints that Jesus learned carpentry from his father (Mark 6:3; cf. Matthew 13:55, Luke 4:22); the legend that Jesus helped Joseph in the carpentry shop can be found as early as the second century *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. That apocryphal gospel talks about an event within the carpentry studio where Joseph needs two beams of the same length, but one is shorter. Jesus stretches the shorter piece of wood to match the length of the existing piece. The story ends: "And his father Joseph saw it and marveled: and he embraced the young child and kissed him, saying: 'Happy am I for that God hath given me this young child'" (chapter XIII).²

In *Childhood of Christ*, Jesus assists his father by holding a candle to light the piece of wood that Joseph is working on. The light has religious iconographic significance, reminding us that Jesus is the light of the world. It is also stylistically important because Gerrit van Honthorst was the most famous of the Utrecht Caravaggisti, the Dutch followers of the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio. Van Honthorst's inclination to use dramatic lighting in nocturnal scenes (through either sources external to the painting

or light sources from within the composition, such as this centrally-located candle) earned him the Italian nickname “Gherardo delle Notti” (Gerard of the Night Scenes).

Jesus, who appears to be eight or nine years old in this scene, has sought the company of his father as he works into the night. Two angels stand to the right of the composition, but neither Jesus nor Joseph seems to notice their presence. Instead Joseph concentrates on his work and Jesus intently watches his father with admiration and tenderness. Children are especially impressionistic at this age and parents are their most important role models. Van Honthorst’s image reminds us that despite all the forces in our culture competing for children’s attention, their parents continue to have greatest significance for them.

NOTES

1 See Dominic Manganiello, “Joseph the Carpenter,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 413-14.

2 *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (<http://wesley.nnu.edu/noncanon/gospels/inftoma.htm>).



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We All Are God's Children

BY HARRIET ILSE ZIEGENHALS

We all are God's children;
you made us every one.
You guard and watch o'er us
from morn 'til setting sun.
Wherever we go, whatever we do,
whenever we're far away,
your loving arms protect us still;
we know you will always with us stay.

Because we're God's children,
we seek to do your will:
to live as you taught us,
your teaching to fulfill,
to pray for the sick, the lonely, the sad,
and those filled with grief or pain.
Be with them through every day, every night,
their hope and their courage to sustain.

Yes, we are God's children,
we're proud to be called your own.
Let's reach 'round the world
so that no child will feel alone.
We'll care for each other, sister and brother,
children across the sea,
'til every age and race and creed
may live free in peace and harmony.

We All Are God's Children

HARRIET I. ZIEGENHALS

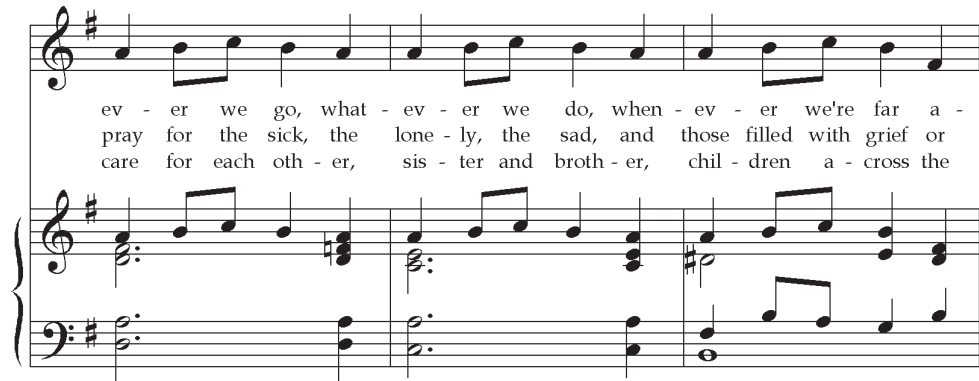
JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

arr. HARRIET I. ZIEGENHALS

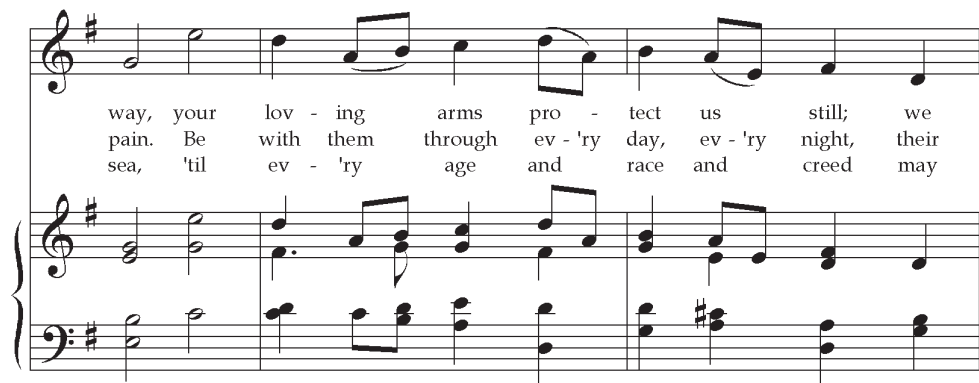
1. We all are God's
2. Be - cause we're God's
3. Yes, we are God's

chil - dren; you made us ev - 'ry one. You guard and watch
chil - dren, we seek to do your will: to live as you
chil - dren, we're proud to be called your own. Let's reach 'round the

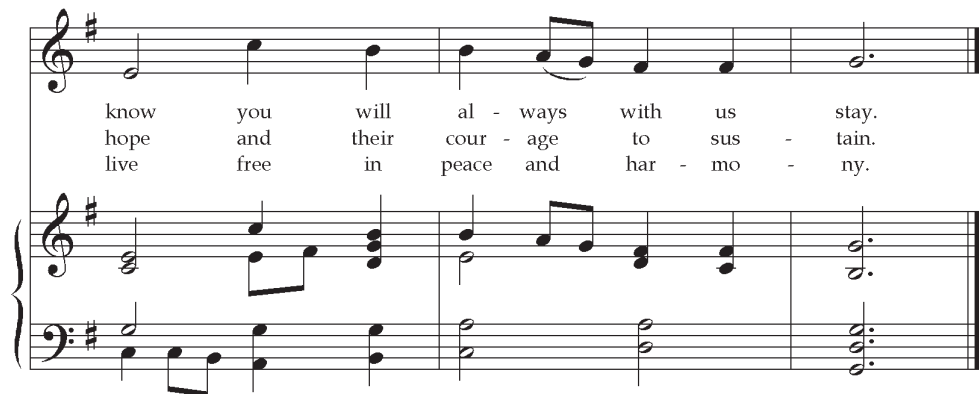
o'er us from morn 'til set - ting sun. Where -
taught us, your teach - ing to ful - fill, to
world so that no child will feel a - lone. We'll



ev - er we go, what - ev - er we do, when - ev - er we're far a -
pray for the sick, the lone - ly, the sad, and those filled with grief or
care for each oth - er, sis - ter and broth - er, chil - dren a - cross the



way, your lov - ing arms pro - tect us still; we
pain. Be with them through ev - 'ry day, ev - 'ry night, their
sea, 'til ev - 'ry age and race and creed may



know you will al - ways with us stay.
hope and their cour - age to sus - tain.
live free in peace and har - mo - ny.

Worship Service

BY HARRIET ILSE ZIEGENHALS

Prelude

*Call to Worship:*¹

Leader:

Do you ever wonder why God made this world?
The flowers in springtime with buds tightly curled?
The trees in the autumn with colors so bright?
The moon with its stars and the sun giving light?

Do you ever wonder why God made a child?
In all shapes and colors, some mighty, some mild?
To share in a family, to run, play and sing?
Yes, God knew the laughter and joy they would bring.

God gave us this world to protect and enjoy,
And God made all children, each girl and each boy,
To nourish and care for this earth all our days.
So let's join in singing our thanks and our praise.

People:

We all join in singing our thanks and our praise!

Hymn:

"Our Father, by Whose Name" ²

Our Father, by whose name all parenthood is known,
in love divine you claim each fam'ly as your own.
Bless mothers, fathers, guarding well, with constant love as sentinel,
the homes in which your people dwell.

O Christ, yourself a child within an earthly home,
with heart still undefiled to full adulthood come:
our children bless in ev'ry place that they may all behold your face
and, knowing you, may grow in grace.

O Holy Spirit, bind our hearts in unity,
and teach us how to find the love from self set free;
in all our hearts such love increase that ev'ry home, by this release,
may be the dwelling-place of peace.

F. Bland Tucker (1895-1984), alt.

Tune: RHOSYMEDRE

Prayer:

God of compassion and understanding,

Help us as parents, pastors, and teachers
to unite in a faithful and nurturing community of love and support
as we care for the needs of children
in our families,
in our congregation, and
in our world.

In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, we pray.
Amen.

Old Testament Reading: Deuteronomy 6:4-7, 12

*Congregational Response:*³

Leader:

O Israel, remember well who brought you to this land;
and Israel, rejoice and tell the wonder of God's hand.

People:

**O Israel, renew yourself, obey the Lord's command;
Sing, dance, clap your hands, obey the Lord's command.**

When Moses lifted up his rod, the waters to divide,
God led you safely through the sea to reach the other side.

**When you were faint with hunger, God sent manna from above,
and water from the rock gushed forth to nourish you with love.**

O Israel, lift up your voice in thanks and endless praise;
Be glad, rejoice, and covenant to serve God all your days.

**O Israel, renew yourself, obey the Lord's command.
Sing, dance, clap your hands, and shout to the Lord your God.**

Choral Response:

"You Shall Have a Song" ⁴

You shall have a song and gladness of heart
for music can joyfully our love to all impart.
Lift ev'ry voice, play the flute and violin,
and you shall have a song to sing. Alleluia!

Make a joyful noise to God all ye lands.
Come serve Him with gladness of heart and mind and hands.
We are His children, He made us ev'ry one;
and we shall have a song to sing, Alleluia!

Enter now His gates with thanksgiving and praise,
for He is our God, let us serve Him all our days.
His steadfast love will endure to the end,
and we shall have a song to sing, Alleluia!

New Testament Reading: Mark 10:13-16*Congregational Response:*⁵

Leader:

We have heard it, we have seen it,
we have touched it with our hands.

People:

**And this love of Christ our Savior
far exceeds His laws demands.**

Thus we know that God is with us
and in Him is no darkness at all,

**that our sins have been forgiven
to complete the joy of us all.**

Only one who loves another
walks from darkness into light,

**loves the least of these my children
though rejected in our sight.**

When we heal the brokenhearted
give unsparing whatever the call,

**we fulfill Christ's new commandment
to complete the joy of us all.**

Choral Response:

"See the World Through Children's Eyes" ⁶

Sermon

Hymn:

"We All Are God's Children" ⁷
(text and tune pp. 40-41 this volume)

Offering

Doxology

Choral Anthem:

"Tapestry" ⁸

Sing of a world that reflects the Creator's design:
planets in orbit, the oceans, the mountains, the earth;
All are part of a master pattern and line.
The world is a tapestry, the colors ev'ry hue;
The world is a tapestry woven for you.

Just as the threads in a tapestry form a design,
God used our lives interwoven with beauty and care
to create a harmonious pattern and line.
Our lives are a tapestry, our colors ev'ry hue;
our lives are a tapestry, the world is a tapestry,
our lives are a tapestry interweaving me and you.

Prayer:

Gracious God,
As we celebrate the gift of our children,
let us make the time
to be with them and
to listen when they try to tell us
what is on their minds and hearts.

Help us to guide them as they grow up
in the midst of this fast-moving and often confusing culture
and give them opportunities
to love the Scriptures,
to pray,
to study, and
to worship.

May we work diligently to develop a loving and caring family
in which each member is recognized
as a special and unique individual.

We pray for the children of this world who live in societies
that do not always understand or recognize the needs
which are so necessary for their welfare.

We pray for the many boys and girls
who are homeless and forgotten,
for those who suffer physical abuse, and
for those who are caught in the horrors of war.

Help us to celebrate the gift of children
wherever they may be in God's world.

Be with us as parents, teachers, pastors, and friends
in the difficult days ahead as we shepherd our children.

Grant us new hope for the living of these days,
that we may hear and share the music of life.

May we always remember:
this is the day which the Lord has made,
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

The Lord's Prayer

Closing Hymn:

"Go, My Children, With My Blessing"

Jaroslav Vajda (b. 1919)

Tune: AR HYD Y NOS (Welsh)

Benediction:

The world's greatest cellist, Pablo Casals, once said:
 "The child must know that he is a miracle;
 that since the beginning of the world there hasn't been,
 and until the end of the world there will not be
 another child like him."

May the Lord bless and keep all our miracles safely in His care.
 Amen.

*Postlude***NOTES**

1 *Do You Ever Wonder?* (Unison, CGA717) Words and Music: Harriet Ziegenhals. Copyright © 1995 Choristers Guild. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

2 Copyright © Church Pension Fund. Used by permission.

3 *Sing, Dance, Clap Your Hands!* (Unison, CGA625) Words: Bob Russ (st. 1) and Harriet Ziegenhals (st. 2-4); Music: Hebrew folk tune, arr. Ziegenhals. Copyright © 1993 Choristers Guild. Stanza 1 and refrain text copyright © 1990 John Ylvisaker. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

4 *You Shall Have a Song* (SA) Words and Music: Harriet I. Ziegenhals. Copyright © 1985 Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

5 *The Joy of Us All* (SATB) Words and Music: Harriet I. Ziegenhals. Copyright © 1980 Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

6 *See the World Through Children's Eyes* (SSA) Words and Music: John Carter. Copyright © 1978 Jenson Publications, Hal Leonard Corp. Order at 1-800-637-2852.

7 *We All Are God's Children* (SA, CGA971) Words by Harriet Ziegenhals; Music by Johannes Brahms, arr. Ziegenhals. Copyright © 2003 Choristers Guild. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

8 *Tapestry* (Unison, CGA533) Words and Music: Harriet Ziegenhals. Copyright © 1990 Choristers Guild. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

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This photo is available in
the print version of Children.

**Jacob's gracious blessing on both of Joseph's children
became the model and inspiration for Jewish fathers
invoking God's care for their children on the eve of each
sabbath.**

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), JACOB BLESSING THE CHILDREN OF JOSEPH, 1656. Oil on canvas, 175.5 x 210.5 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Kassel, Germany. Copyright Foto Marburg / Art Resource, NY.

Invoking God's Care

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Summoned to the death bed of his father Jacob (Israel), Joseph presents his sons Manasseh and Ephraim to their grandfather for his blessing (Genesis 48). Joseph and his wife Asenath watch calmly behind the young boys.[†] The moment shown by Rembrandt deviates slightly, but significantly, from the biblical account: "Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right, and brought them near him" (48:13).

The boys are in the opposite positions in this painting. Ephraim, the younger boy with long blonde hair, is on the right side of Jacob; he bows his head as Jacob blesses him with his right hand. Jacob places his left hand on the side of Manasseh's head. Rembrandt makes this position change rather than having Jacob cross his hands (as occurs in 48:14). The blessing, which invokes God's care, is given.

The instant when Joseph tries to stop and correct his aged father is the subject of the painting. We see the hand of Joseph under Jacob's right hand as if to lift it up and away from the younger son. Joseph said to his father,

"Not so, my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." But his father refused, and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations." So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel will invoke blessings, saying, 'God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh.'" So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh.

Genesis 48:18-20

In blessing both of his grandchildren, Jacob also invokes God's care for his son Joseph (48:15). Blessing the children is an act of faith and worship, the writer of Hebrews says: "By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, 'bowing in worship over the top of his staff'" (11:21).

NOTE

[†] Asenath, not mentioned in Genesis 48, was Joseph's Egyptian wife and the mother of Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis 41:45, 50). An extra-biblical story, *Joseph and Asenath*, speculates on her betrothal to Joseph and conversion to Judaism (Encyclopedia.com by Alacritude, LLC, 2003, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/P/Pseudepi.asp>, 21 May 2003).

This photo is available in
the print version of *Children*.

Young children will relate to Jesus as a child who, like themselves, wants to be listened to by adults. Often they have much to say to busy adults who could learn much by taking time to sit down and listen; their active and guileless minds may reveal profound insights.

Unknown artist, JESUS AMONG THE DOCTORS from the WELTCHRONIK, German, Regensburg, c. 1400-10. Tempera colors and gold paint on parchment, MS. 33, FOL. 261. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. © The J. Paul Getty Museum.

In Her Heart

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Luke 2:46-52

With glorious colors this manuscript page wonderfully illustrates Luke 2:46-52 in a manner that speaks not only to its original audience in the early fifteenth century, but also to Christian families today.

From the raised throne, a typical placement for a medieval teacher, Jesus instructs the four bearded adult 'pupils' below him. In Luke these 'pupils' are teachers, and herein is the irony: the teachers have become the students of the boy Jesus. Several of them hold books and two students point to marked passages with their fingers; they raise questions and Jesus responds. A pupil in the foreground wearing a blue garment appears to hold his open book behind his back, though his head faces Jesus. (This odd-looking pose indicates the artist's lack of technical expertise in one-point linear perspective; the artist is unable to correctly position the figure in profile and show both his head facing Jesus and his arms holding the open book.)

From the right side of the throne, a stairway leads to a door that opens to the next scene in the biblical story. Jesus appears again in this *istoria* or multi-part narrative; but now, Mary and Joseph are there, encouraging Jesus to "come along." This technique is used frequently by artists of the fifteenth century to portray the next "frame" of the story and is often, but not always, read from left to right. Today's comic strips may find their compositional source in this type of narrative arrangement.

Unable to find her son, Mary construes his actions as disrespectful; she speaks in an anxious and even annoyed tone. The family trip to Jerusalem for Passover should have ended three days earlier, and she is ready to get home to Nazareth. Jesus, holding his wax writing tablet, defends his actions and tries to reason with his mother. The painting represents this quite realistically: Mary and Joseph face the direction that they want him to move, while Jesus is still talking about where he was and what he was doing, his Father's work! Despite his enjoyment of what he was doing and the fact that neither Mary nor Joseph understands him, Jesus obediently follows them. From this point, Mary's role in the story takes on a different tone; we're told that she "treasured these things in her heart." While continuing as the loving mother who will guide her son, she must accept not only the sometimes painful separation as he matures, but also the deep mystery of the earthly role given him by his Father.

Both children and parents can appreciate this painting and the story it depicts. Jesus is able to teach those of all ages who are willing to learn. Children will relate to Jesus as a child who, like themselves, wants to be listened to by adults. So often, children have much to say to busy adults who could learn much by taking time to sit down and listen; their active and guileless minds may reveal profound insights.

We must remember that God sent Jesus as a child, to learn and to grow within his family, community, and world. Mary and Joseph loved him and raised him, experiencing many of the same struggles felt by all parents. They learned, and so must all adults who guide children, to balance teaching with listening. We may gain much as we follow Mary's example and keep these things in our hearts.



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Parenting Virtues Today

BY DAVID L. JOHNS

Parenting can be an unnerving prospect for many people today, for it opens us to vulnerability, change, and being permanently shaped by the habits we practice. Yet, as we parent with Christian intentionality, we may be advanced in holiness by our children and shaped into new creations embodying hope, humility, and hospitality.

Rearing a child is not like housing a cat. My apologies to those whose lives are enriched by four-legged furry creatures; however, in a time when pets are treated like children and children like pets, perhaps a reminder is in order. Parenting takes on numerous forms; in many cases, these are good and life-giving, but too often they are damaging and life-depleting. As much as we might like to believe the contrary, the fact that Christians are involved in the process is no guarantee that parenting will be done well.

Parenting, whether performed with Christian intentionality or not, is more than housing, feeding, cleaning, and playing with children. Great moral significance attaches to what happens in families because it entails intense involvement with an other, the forming of character, the receiving of life, and the releasing of life into an unknown future. These are not tasks for the faint of heart.

“Task” is not quite the right word to describe parenting, if it conveys the idea that parents are unmoved and unchanged subjects who shape their children like pliable objects. On the contrary, a very intimidating prospect of parenting is that the one who thinks he is shaping an other will in fact be shaped himself, and the one who is certain she is instructing will, without question, be instructed. The movements of growth are not *parent to child* alone, for parents as well as their children are shaped and transformed

through the process of living closely together.

This is not surprising. “Who we are,” Christopher Morse notes, “is only revealed in our relationships with others.”¹ Not only do human relationships reveal to us our own inner landscape, illuminating terrain we might not see apart from that relationship, they effect change within us as well. To love another is to open ourselves to the possibility of growing and of being wounded, for the prospect of being changed exists at every turn.

How inadequate then are those parenting metaphors that suggest our children are inanimate clay to be molded or twigs to be bent in our hands! The molding and bending that takes place may well be of us parents. There is important work to be done as Christian parents, but we must know from the outset, that risks lie ahead.

We could easily compile a list of challenges to parenting today: materialism, cynicism, fear of the other, loss of hope, self-absorption, and regarding children as mere instruments to our self-fulfillment, status, security, or immortality. Rather than lament personal vices and decry cultural ills, I will focus on several virtues essential to Christian parenting in our culture.

BECOMING WHAT WE DO

Virtues, the ancient philosopher Aristotle famously wrote, are habits or dispositions that give us the ability to act rightly and with competence, to do the right thing at the right time and in the right way. They dispose us to take pleasure in and develop a taste for goodness, and thus draw us toward human excellence. James McClendon suggests that we think of virtues as “excellencies or skills enabling us to enjoy to the full or fulfill the elements of the embodied moral life,” and vices as “defects preventing or diminishing that enjoyment.”²

Many today are discovering the wisdom of thinking about our moral lives in terms of character, or the virtues and vices. Though much more could be said about this approach to ethics, two points are important here.

The first is that our virtues become habitual, or second nature. They become so deeply ingrained that they no longer need to be consciously monitored or maintained, but are always ‘in play’ as we face each situation in our lives. This is important because many occasions that require moral judgment simply do not afford us the luxury of a lengthy period for deliberation. It is helpful to have time to weigh a decision—*do I or do I not*. Yet in the general flow our lives we often do not have time for careful thought in the moment. Rather, the way we are present with another person, the way we respond to this challenge or that, flows more immediately from a heart marked by these habits of virtue.

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush,” Jesus taught. “The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the

evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:43-45). Our habits or “fruit” reveal the motives at work deep within us. In unguarded moments of habitual response, we learn a great deal about ourselves—what we value and upon what we base our life.

This is also where acting out of virtue differs from ‘moral legalism.’ Anyone can be required by law to act in this way or that, and most are able to follow such directives at least part of the time. However, architects of society or of the family who focus primarily upon external influences for our actions and who advocate for external motivations, such as hope for rewards or fear of punishments, fail to recognize an important point: to be required by law to do good things does not make people virtuous or society good. To do a loving deed in order to obtain a reward or avoid punishment is not yet to be a loving person. Virtue goes deeper and is more fundamental than our actions—we speak (and act) out of the “overflow of our hearts.” A loving person is one who meets the gifts and challenges of her life with a regular practice of lovingness, not ‘random acts.’ Her life and actions are *characterized* by love.

The second general point to remember is that we are not born with habits of virtues, but acquire them over time. We learn a craft, says Aristotle, by *practicing* it; likewise, we become virtuous by practicing virtue. Ironically, many couples today are choosing not to have children because they do not have, in their words, “what it takes” to be parents. (Such rationale should be greeted with an enthusiastic, “Of course you don’t, and neither do I!” If parenthood were restricted only to those who have “what it takes” and are truly “ready” for the undertaking, then humanity would most certainly be extinct.) Contrary to this astonishing lack of parental confidence, the Second Vatican Council offered a high view of the contribution of children to the spiritual maturity of their parents: “as living members of the family, children contribute in their own way to making their parents holy.”³ Instead of assuming women and men must attain a high level of parental competence or a depth of holiness before welcoming children into their home, the assumption here is that growth in holiness is, in part, one

Children may “contribute in their own way to making their parents holy.” Instead of assuming we must attain a high level of parental competence before welcoming children into the home, the assumption here is that growth in holiness is, in part, one of the gifts children give to their parents.

of the gifts children give to their parents. Parenting can be a context for Christian spiritual growth and it presents innumerable opportunities for women and men to increase in virtue by practicing everything from love to patience, sacrifice, and courage.

Yet, for Christians, practicing is only the one part of the story of how people acquire the virtues. God's gracious assistance must inspire and suffuse our moral efforts. Many writers follow Thomas Aquinas in distinguishing between *natural* virtues and *infused* virtues. *Natural virtues* are those habits we can develop over time by exercising our natural, inborn capacities. Classically, these included practical wisdom, courage, justice, and thoughtful moderation of pleasure. Because they are like a hinge upon which many other virtues—found on those lists we received from Homer, Aristotle, Benjamin Franklin, or our own parents—hang, these four traits were called “cardinal” virtues (from the Latin word *cardo*, for hinge). *Infused virtues*, on the other hand, are dispositions that are given to us as gifts from God. For example, Aquinas says God gives us extra portions of courage and moderation to resist the distorting effects of sin, and surplus wisdom to pursue God's calling. Chief among the infused virtues, however, are totally new dispositions of faith, hope, and love. These are called *theological virtues* because they are directed toward God and are central to Christian faith. How humbling it is that of all possible virtues, it is these—the totally new gifts to us—that, the Apostle Paul says, remain after everything else fades away (1 Corinthians 13:13).

PARENTING VIRTUES

What makes parenting appear so risky to many people today is that it changes us. The magnitude of this change increases the more we fear change, the more we are convinced we're sufficient unto ourselves alone, and the more we are consumed by the cultural conditions of materialism, cynicism, fear of the other, loss of hope, self-absorption, and viewing children as instrumental ends. Entering, heart and soul, into this vocation prevents us from ever being completely *for ourselves* alone. We do not disappear, but we are not our own. The self-absorption so characteristic of our culture cannot long last when we offer ourselves for and to the care of another human being.

In order to know another as deeply as parents know children, we must be vulnerable. Parenting will illuminate our weaknesses, flaws, insecurities, and idiosyncrasies. In my own years as a father, I have been taken to the limits of emotion and on some days have felt exposed to the full range of human experience—love to the extreme, bewilderment, pride, fatigue, joy, and frustration. In our vulnerability, many of the illusions we have maintained about ourselves will come undone.

The greatest challenge in Christian parenting may well be how to avoid a diminished imagination. This may come as a surprise. Yet, parenting is an

exercise in applied eschatology, in living today in the light of God's promised future. It is a vocation that requires a longer view, a confidence in Someone greater than ourselves and something more expansive than the present moment. Imagination opens us to possibilities and to worlds far beyond our perception (which is blinkered by an uninspired culture). We become cynical and lose hope when all meaning must be found in the present moment. The importance of "being present" and "living in the moment" notwithstanding, when all time collapses into this very moment we lose a sense of direction and are no longer able to maneuver through the chaos. From a different vantage point, however, the way is clearer and vistas are obvious that were once not even imaginable.

HOPE

Because parenting requires from us a longer view, foremost among parenting virtues is *hope*. That Christians even regard hope as virtuous is a departure from classical Greek wisdom that portrayed hope as an evil unleashed upon humans from Pandora's opened box. It is important to be clear here. When Christian parents hope, they do not hope in their children. Hope is directed elsewhere and is inseparable from the larger story of the Christian faith, of creation, cross, and resurrection. Bumper sticker maxims and romantic idealism about "children are our future" miss the point of faith. "And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?" the psalmist asks, "My hope is in you" (Psalm 39:7). "By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; *you are the hope* of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas" (Psalm 65:5, my emphasis). While it is a mark of Christian faith to believe that humans

cooperate in doing God's work, we cooperate because it is *God through Christ* who, in the words of the prophet, is "about to do a new thing" (Isaiah 43:19). Christian hope is in God and in the movements of God's grace and love; God is our future, and toward this future we go with confidence. Each of the theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—is grounded in and oriented toward God from first to last.

When we "hope in the Lord," our perspective on our own life and our

When we "hope in the Lord," our perspective on life elongates. This present moment does not contain all meaning; and because something salvific touches each moment—past, present, and future—we realize it is premature to give up on any child; their final chapter has not yet been written and God continues to build "a way in the wilderness."

children's lives elongates. This present moment does not contain all meaning; and because something salvific touches each moment—past, present, and future—we have cause for confidence in all times. As many Christians pray before communion: “Christ *has* died, Christ *is* risen, Christ *will* come again.” Hope understands that the life of our child is unfolding into a future where God is and indeed into a future that gives shape to us today. As the gift of hope pulses through us, we realize it is premature to give up on any child, because their final chapter has not yet been written and God continues to build “a way in the wilderness” (Isaiah 49:13).

HUMILITY

Another important virtue in Christian parenting is *humility*. Like hope, it is a quality some may dismiss as not being virtuous, or even reject as being an expression of weakness or as counterproductive to realizing human goods. Yet the New Testament, on six occasions, names humility as a desirable disposition for the person of Christian faith. In two of these texts, we are directed to be “clothed” with humility (Colossians 3:12 and 1 Peter 5:5).

Humility challenges the materialism of our culture and its persistent temptation to regard children as possessions. Materialism would lead us to believe that the acquisition of possessions is an indication of success. Based upon discontentment, the mantra from this worldview is “I want, therefore I am.” The more we own, the better we are and the more meaningful our life will be. This is much more than an issue of economics; it is fundamentally a spiritual issue. From what do we derive identity, worth, significance, acceptance, and a sense of belonging? Is it possible for the human longing for friendship or the desire for deep significance to be satisfied by consuming? Or are *we* what is consumed in the process?

Unfortunately, in this view of the world, children are, consciously or unconsciously, added to the list of consumer items to acquire. In some situations, children have carried the weight of trying to bring “meaning” into a parent's life, or to help “bring together” a couple drifting apart. Children have also been little more than visible expressions of a man's virility or a woman's womanhood. While it may be less common these days to give birth to children in order to have an heir for the transferal of family assets, children in some cases are birthed simply to provide immortality for their parents.

An advantage of “being clothed in humility” is that by so doing, we no longer require the acceptance of the materialistic crowd; humility understands that meaning, significance, and worth are not attainments awarded to the most industrious, but that these—like children themselves—are gifts to us from God.

HOSPITALITY

A final virtue I will mention is *hospitality*, a willingness to welcome the stranger. Careful rules for hospitality in place in the Near East during bibli-

cal times, and even today, could move a person from the status of stranger to that of a friend. This custom of hospitality was both encouraged and practiced by the earliest Christian communities (Acts 17:7, 21:17, and 28:7; Romans 12:13 and 16:23; 1 Peter 4:9). It may appear odd to regard our own children as strangers toward whom we ought to be hospitable, and perhaps this speaks more of a male perspective on becoming acquainted with a child not carried for nine months. I am not suggesting, of course, that the nuanced regulations of this ancient tradition be followed with respect to our children. However, as a father or a mother, the birth or adoption of a child is a welcoming of an other into our life. A child is always one who is not us, no matter how much the child may resemble the mother or father. Regardless of how close we grow to our children, they will always be strangers to us. It is simply a condition of human existence that growth and change will cause a person who is familiar to us today to be very different tomorrow. Parenting involves a lifetime of letting go. Our images of who our children are and will become certainly are among that which must be relinquished in faith.

But there is another reason I mention hospitality as a parenting virtue. Notions of blood, kin, and seed are no longer adequate to account for the many ways that we are in parental or parental-like relationships with children. Cultivating hospitality will help us learn to embrace those who do not share our DNA:

adopted children, step-children, nieces, nephews, and cousins. Jesus expanded our understanding of family to include those beyond blood ties: “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:50). Furthermore, as Ted Peters notes, God’s pattern of relationship with Israel is that of an adoptive parent who makes and fulfills

Notions of blood, kin, and seed are no longer adequate to account for the many ways that we are in parental or parental-like relationships with children. Cultivating hospitality will help us learn to embrace those who do not share our DNA: adopted children, step-children, nieces, nephews, and cousins.

promises and who lives in covenant fidelity with them.⁴ The ‘chosen people’ are not birthed from the loins of divinity, but called, adopted, and, finally in the Gospels, the faithful are embraced as friends of Jesus (John 15:15). When praying *Our Father* in Jesus’ model prayer, we are reminded in the worshipping community of our own adoption as sons and daughters and of the divine hospitality extended to each of us.

CONCLUSION

The spiritual fruit of Christian parenting (including the virtues of hope, humility, and hospitality), is rarely observed straightaway; it requires confidence in “things seen and unseen” and an acknowledgment that for the time being we look at the reality of family life through a foggy lens. To see beyond the easily “seen” requires a lively moral imagination, a depth of imagination sorely lacking in our own time. This does not mean parents close their eyes to the concrete struggles and realities of the present moment, or retreat from wider society into secluded enclaves of churchy righteousness. Rather, this imagination is made alive by an elongated vision that believes “God is about to do a new thing.” This way of seeing is not restricted to a distant tomorrow; it also gives shape and texture to the present. If the Christian community would live and parent with such imagination, we would be a living presence of God’s good news.

On the other hand, if we are persuaded by the shallowness of an impatient culture, our vision will grow shortsighted, the future will be ‘too far off,’ and the meaning of our lives, too, will seem intangible and abstract. Over time, our eyes will learn to see only those things material and immediate. As we become distorted by the materialism of a consumer culture, our parenting will deteriorate into a series of managed crises, storage problems, discontent, and despair.

To parent with Christian intentionality opens us to change, vulnerability, and being forever marked by the habits we practice. But by parenting with Christian integrity we can be shaped into new creations and advanced in holiness *by our children*. This will be an unnerving prospect to some; but considering what we know about God, it should not be surprising.

NOTES

1 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: a Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 256.

2 James Wm. McClendon, *Ethics*, volume 1, *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 104.

3 *Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

4 Ted Peters, *For the Love of Children: Genetic Technology and the Future of the Family* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 26-30.



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On Raisin' Abel

BY ROBERT B. SLOAN, JR.

Developing Christian practice and virtue in our children is a complex matter. Yet the Bible, though not providing sure-fire, step-by-step instructions for parents to follow, promises that when parents are faithful in their responsibilities, there is a fair expectation of a good result.

The Bible is surprisingly less direct about how to be a parent than we might expect. Yet it contains several very helpful and judicious passages, including this one in the book of Proverbs: “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray” (22:6). While not providing a blueprint for parents to follow, the verse does work to inspire hope. If parents are faithful in their responsibilities, then there is a fair expectation that a good result is in order.

However, experience tells us that this proverb comes with an unstated qualification, “most of the time.” When parents raise children in the way they should go, then *most of the time* they will not stray from their parents’ teaching. This is not to say that Scripture is wrong or somehow deceptive; indeed, the very nature of Proverbs is to provide general wisdom and thus 22:6 is a completely wise and faithful word. Certainly the proverb allows, and experience confirms, that superb and faithful parenting does not always yield perfect children. Recall that Cain, the first murderer, and his faithful brother Abel were raised by the same parents! Nor do mistakes in parenting always translate into bad kids—a fact which is a sizable relief to parents and a sure sign of God’s grace. This passage and our experience indicate that, in spite of what anyone may claim, parenting cannot be reduced to a sure-fire, step-by-step set of instructions or a simple, one-size-fits-all formula. Like life and our following God, being a parent is a pretty complex matter.

Despite this mystery, much can be said about parenting. Here I offer

some pragmatic reflections for parents who are intent on developing Christian practice and virtue in their children. These reflections are rooted in the logic of Scripture and in my experience of having reared seven children.

We should not be afraid to talk with our children about God, the Bible, what we believe, and how this impacts our choices and the living of life. A foundational text in the Bible about raising children instructs parents to engage their children about issues of faith: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:4-7). We are to model and teach to our children faithfulness to God.

On special occasions such as Christmas, Easter, baptisms, and anniversaries it is easier to model faithfulness, but we do not have to wait for special teachable moments to become teachers of the gospel. Instead, as this verse indicates, we should capitalize on the common, everyday experiences of life—those that are present morning, noon, and night—to instill the faith in our children. Remarkably, what this verse assumes—and what many religious, ethnic, and family traditions capitalize upon—is that virtues and practices can be taught, that moral formation can occur through a form of conversation. This truth, which is at the heart of Robert Cole's *The Moral Intelligence of Children*, is that building character inside our children requires imaginative conversation about moral choices and their consequences. These conversations about matters of faith and formation are rooted in the belief that the gospel can, and must, be taught and learned (cf. Colossians 1:7).

As parents, we should demonstrate consistency in our lives. It is hard to overestimate the power of linking word and deed. Several biblical texts come to mind here. For example, Jesus tells his disciples that a tree is known by the fruit it bears (Matthew 7:15-20) and that there is a premium on both hearing and doing the word (7:24-27). The little book of James puts it bluntly: true faith produces works (James 2:18-26). Parenting, in this sense, is more a test of the parents' own character than a test of parenting skills or wisdom. Conversations, actions, reactions, and the stewardship of time are not only the very best commentary on our intentions and goals as parents, but what parents *do* may very well be the best teaching tool of the gospel. If we want our children to possess virtue, then we must be serious students of our own souls. If we want our children to embrace a way of life that is consistent with the gospel, then we must connect our inner life with God to the way in which we act. If we pray that our children mature to dream dreams worthy of the Kingdom, then we must allow a Kingdom vision to guide our lives. In other words, we must be examples of faithful-

ness to our children. We must mate our words of parental wisdom with the deeds of our discipleship.

Parents should exhibit accountability to each other and to their children. The covenant of marriage is a wonderful resource that ably assists parents in this task. The genuine expression of devotion and faithfulness from one partner to another strengthens them as they parent children. When Paul gives instruction to families, it is interesting that he addresses all members. Children are told to “obey” their parents (Colossians 3:20) and to “honor” their parents (Ephesians 6:2), but parents are equally charged by the apostle: they are not to “provoke” their children unduly lest they become too discouraged (Colossians 3:21; Ephesians 6:4). In other words, parents and children are partners—even if unequal ones—in the process of parenting. We should thus make sure that our children sense that they, too, are participants in a family covenant. That means that as parents we should never make promises we can’t, or never intend to, fulfill.

We must work hard at parenting. I refer to this as the lunch pail principle. If you plan to be a good parent, then bring your lunch pail, for it is an all-day affair. Children need time—not only quality time, but also a quantity of quality time—from their parents. It is easy to allow the concerns of life to crowd out this kind of time. However, making sure that parents and children can play together, do homework together, be together at ball games and dance recitals, is crucial to parenting. It is also hard work. It takes time and energy to be present with children. Moreover, some children are easy to parent. They are compliant, respectful, and tender of heart. Others, however, seem always ready to test whatever boundary is established. More often than not, these children also seem able to find the most vulnerable moment to test a boundary. It is then that true parenting begins—when we’re tired, when it’s easy to give in, when it’s too complicated or difficult to be the parent we should. It is then that we must continue to be parents and stay the course. Simply stated, parenting is hard work.

I call it the lunch pail principle: if you plan to be a good parent, then bring your lunch pail, for it is an all-day affair. Children need time—not only quality time, but also a quantity of quality time—from their parents.

We should cultivate the habit of blessing our children. The Bible is full of stories of what happens when parents lavish blessings upon their children. Scripture is equally frank about what happens when parents withhold a blessing. At the heart of this practice is the recognition that parents really do have both the power to bless and to curse—to cause children to prosper

and, regrettably, to limit what they think about themselves. We need look no further than the story of Jacob and Esau to see how a child needs the blessing of a parent, and the negative consequences that accrue when parents let that opportunity pass them by (Genesis 27:1-33:17). The act of blessing has great power, far more than simply the power of positive thinking. Blessing our children, by simply and regularly hugging them and whispering a prayer in their ear, invites the Spirit of the living God to become part of the parenting and maturing process. In this sense, a parent's blessing of a child acquires a certain sacramental quality.

Parenting is hard work, but it is matched by joys that are incomparable. May God our Father grant us the grace of this covenant duty well done.



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Good Grief!

BY MARK MCCLINTOCK

A puppet can be an effective counseling tool with children, for an imaginary character diminishes the communication barrier between adults and children. In this sermon, Sidney guides children in developing healthy patterns of grieving, behaviors that will facilitate their encounters with loss throughout their lives.

As a parent and a minister called to work with children, I want all that is best for the little ones in my care. In the church, however, we often confuse what is best with what elicits happiness. Children naturally experience the sorrow and pain of loss, whether it is a misplaced toy, a move to a new school, or the death of a loved one. Citing a child's natural resilience as a rationale, adults may assume that the young person's grief experience will be brief and have no long-term consequences. A well-meaning grown-up may even attempt to expedite the "rebound" by engaging the child in cheerful activities. A far more helpful response would be to guide children in developing healthy patterns of grieving—behaviors that will facilitate their encounters with loss throughout their lives.

A puppet can be an effective counseling tool with children; research shows the imaginary character can diminish the communication barrier that naturally exists between an adult and a child. A puppet on the adult's hand functions as a peer and advocate for the child; a puppet on the child's hand allows the child to express troubling thoughts and emotions, projecting the responsibility for these ideas onto the puppet. In my years of church ministry, the art of ventriloquism served me well in communicating with children, both in counseling and teaching. When a puppet as advocate seemed the best way to help listeners understand and learn a theological point, I would even incorporate it into a children's sermon.

I wrote "Good Grief" soon after a beloved First Grade Sunday School teacher had died. The preschool and early elementary school-age children, as well as the numerous adults in attendance, responded with great compassion and sensitivity. Although Sidney is a puppet—and I am very careful to remind people that he is a puppet whose voice comes from inside me—my listeners of all ages comprehended the truth of the human experience Sidney helped me to speak. The gospel reading for the day was John 11:1-44, the death and raising of Lazarus. Though the restoration of Lazarus' life is important as a prefigurement of Jesus' resurrection, that part of the story interferes with the child's ability to let go of the individual who has died. I chose to emphasize Jesus' empathic and healthy human response to the death of his friend and the grief of Mary and Martha.



MARK: Hello, Sidney, how are you today?

SIDNEY: Terrible.

I beg your pardon?

I said I'm terrible.

But I said, how are you today?

I heard you the first time! I'm still terrible!

(Taking script from pocket and reading over it) **Wait a minute, Sid, that's not in the script. When I say, "How are you today?" you're supposed to say, "Just fine, how are you?" Let's try it again. Hello, Sidney, how are you today?**

(Angrily) **JUST FINE, HOW ARE YOU!!!**

Oh, that was so much better. Sidney, you're my puppet, right?

Right.

And I make you speak, right?

Let me see. *(Pantomimes trying to speak by himself)* Looks like I can't do it by myself.

Then when I say, "How are you?" why do you keep saying "Terrible"?

Well...I guess maybe that's how you really feel, too.

Now that I think about it, I am feeling rather sad. So you're feeling terrible, huh?

(To children) Excuse him. Sometimes it takes him a little while to catch on.

But I had no idea you could be sad. You're always smiling, you know.

That's the way I'm made. Besides, I see a lot of grown-ups who always smile even though they feel rotten inside, don't you?

I suppose most of us hide our feelings sometimes. That's not always healthy.

Healthy?

Right. It's not healthy to bottle up our feelings. There are healthy ways we can show our feelings.

You mean I gotta do exercises while I cry? (*Sobs while bending down and up*) One-boo-hoo! Two-boo-hoo! Three-boo-hoo!

No, Sidney. What I mean is that crying can be a healthy way to show sadness.

Sometimes I feel like crying. And sometimes I don't.

That's normal. It is also healthy to talk about why you are sad. Would you like to tell me about it?

You know my best friend, Jake? His grandma died last week. She took care of him every day when he came home from school. He loved her a lot.

I can see why you feel sad for Jake.

I also feel confused. I don't know what to say to Jake. I called him on the phone, and he wouldn't talk. So I went to his house, and he just cried and cried. What should I do? Tell him he's getting healthier?

That's a good question, Sidney. We just heard a Bible story about Jesus going to see some friends who were sad.

I heard that! Lazarus died, and his sisters were upset with Jesus.

They knew Jesus had healed people who were sick. They believed Jesus could help Lazarus get well. But Jesus didn't come until it was too late—Lazarus had already died.

When Jesus came to them, Mary and Martha were filled with grief.

Grief?

Yes, do you know what grief is?

It's what my mom gives me when I show her my report card.

Actually, grief is what you go through when you lose something or someone. It might be one of your favorite toys, or it might be the loss of your friends if your family moves to a new home. It might even be the loss of a person you love, when they died.

Like Jake lost his grandma.

Right. If you keep grief inside, it can become poisonous. You need to let it out. That's called mourning.

What is it called after supper? Evening? (*He laughs*) Oops, sorry. I guess I shouldn't laugh.

No, laughter can help, too, as long as it doesn't hurt someone else.

I'm good at making people laugh! Did Jesus make Mary and Martha laugh?



No.

Did he tell them everything would be okay?

No.

Then what did he do?

He cried with them.

Oh, he cried with them—He cried with them?? Jesus, the Son of God, cried??

Jesus, the Son of God, and the human being, felt their sadness. He shared their grief. Sometimes the best thing you can do when someone is grieving is just to be with them. You don't have to say anything. And, if you feel like crying, too, that's okay.

I guess...if I share Jake's grief, it might make it a little easier on him.

It might. It can help just to know someone else cares.

Hey, didn't Jesus bring Lazarus back to life in that story? Maybe he can bring Jake's grandma back to life!

The Bible does teach that Jesus will bring us back to life some day, but we don't know when that will be. Until then, we will still lose people and things, and we will still grieve. And Jesus has shown us that when we do grieve, he is grieving with us. Jesus cares.

Jesus cares. Well, I still feel sad, but it's a lot easier to be sad when I know that Jesus is sad with me.

I am sorry, Sidney, that I didn't take your grief seriously at first. I will try to be there with you while you are sad.

Mark, I'm a puppet, you're stuck with me whether you like it or not!

I do like it. Let's pray.

Loving God, thank you for choosing to be with us when we are sad, grieve with us, and cry with us. Fill us with your kind of love so that we will stick with each other in our happy and sad times, too. Amen.



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Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

BY LEDAYNE MCLEESE POLASKI

Children harbor God-given gifts waiting to be discovered. How can we nurture the unfolding of what God wove into the children in our families, churches, schools, and neighborhoods, as well as the children whom we will never know?

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

Psalm 139:13-15

She has my nose, her Daddy's unbelievably long eyelashes, along with vivid blue eyes that come from who knows where. She has my thick hair, Daddy's sweet face, and it seems so far (please let it be so!) his usually sweet and easy-going disposition as well. When we were expecting her, like all parents-to-be, we speculated what she would be like. We were both excited and afraid. After all, a child with the best of the both of us could be astoundingly wonderful while a child with the worst of both of us...well, that just didn't bear thinking about.

When she arrived, a friend and fellow mother of young children sent a card of congratulations with a thought that has stuck with me: parenting, it said, is not so much a matter of implanting things in our children as it is a

continual process of finding ways to allow what is already within them to unfold. Even as she approaches her second birthday, it is more and more clear that as much as we have learned of her in these wonderful months, she remains a mystery. Who knows what has been knit together within her, what remains to unfold, what she will yet become? She may yet fulfill her latest stated professional ambition to drive a big truck or a school bus!

This much is certain: having her has made me much more attuned to the emotional landscape of my own childhood. I find myself far more aware, and far more grateful, for the love that surrounded me from my birth. On the dresser in my bedroom there is a collage of photographs that my mother put together for my grandfather for his 90th birthday. I inherited it when he passed away several years later. In the lower left corner there is a picture of my grandmother and grandfather with me as a newborn. My grandmother is holding me so that I am between the two of them; they are both peering down at me. Looking at this picture, looking at my grandparents' faces, one thing is perfectly clear: I am the center of the universe! As the only child of an only child, I was their only grandchild, and nothing ever happened to alter their view that I was the center of the created order. To them, I was indeed "wonderfully made."

On the other hand, most people do not regard me with the same biased and unreasoning satisfaction. Several years ago my pastor invited me to be one of several members of the congregation to offer a meditation in worship on Psalm 139:14. My husband Tom, the person who knows me best, immediately volunteered to let me speak about my being "wonderfully made" while he took up the topic of my being "fearfully made." I shared this with the congregation as part of my meditation, telling them, "Time constraints prevent us from honoring his request."

I am neither so falsely humble nor so unaware of my own faults and frailties that I do not see the truth in both views of me. So, is that what these verses are all about—the fact that we are all both wonderful to behold and fear-inspiring all at the same time? Though that concept is both interesting and true, it is not the meaning this passage holds for me. It leads me to think instead of the awesome nature of being human, of being created by the same hands that created the universe and all that is within it. I hear these words and think that there is more within each of us—more within you, more within me, and more within each person we know and each person we encounter—than we can guess or dream. More than Tom and I can imagine about our daughter. More than my grandparents imagined about me.

The psalmist's claim that there is within us so much to unfold reminds me of my own story. Though reluctant to make myself an example, I also believe that the best thing we can ask of a biblical claim or story is, "How do we know this to be true in our own lives?" So here goes:

I decided as a sophomore in college that God was calling me to go to seminary. I had little idea of what might lie beyond that, little idea of what sort of career I might pursue afterwards, but I felt a strong pull to go. And so I did. Amid my vocational questioning and confusion, there was one thing I was very sure of: I did not, under any circumstances, *ever* want to preach. I spent years dreading and avoiding the preaching class I would have to take in order to get my degree. Finally, when I could wait no longer, I took the course. An amazing, astounding thing happened. As I did this thing that I dreaded and feared, my classmates and my professor began to use this completely unexpected word in reference to my preaching: “gift.” They said that I had a *gift* for preaching. I was shocked. And here is where the “fearfully” part comes in: I was scared. As scared as I had ever been. What on earth could this mean? You see, I had learned my Sunday School and Training Union lessons well. I knew what it meant to have a gift: if God gives you a gift, God means for you to use it. I did not want this gift. I did not want to do this thing. I did not want to change the way I thought about my self, my call, and my future. It was indeed a fearful time. And yet, it was also a wonderful time. For I learned that, despite all my fears, this was something that I loved to do, a secret woven into my being even while I was being formed. And so I began to do this thing. And I can say now that there is no aspect of my work and of my call that brings me more pure joy. Locked within me, there was something beyond my imagining, a wonderful and fearful gift. Perhaps (and here is grace indeed), it is not the only one. Perhaps more wait to be discovered. The psalmist says it is the same for us all, and for all our children.

Who are the children we’re thus called to nurture and unfold? Several years ago, an older colleague of mine attended a workshop led by a leading thinker on generational patterns and differences. My colleague came back and told me that, according to the speaker, the difference between his

generation and mine was this: his generation set out to save the world, and, if their families went to hell in a handbasket while they were at it, that was just a cost of having a mission of such great importance. By contrast, members of my generation, not coincidentally the children of the world-savers, are out to save our families, and, if the world goes to hell while we’re at it, that’s just the price of having a mission of such great im-

The psalmist reminds me of the awesome nature of being human, of being created by the same hands that created the universe and all that is within it. There is more within each of us than we can guess or dream.

portance. Like all sweeping generalizations, this one is oversimplified and limited, but it is nevertheless instructive. Our calling is somewhere in between. We are called to nurture all children, the ones closest to us and the ones at such distance that we will never see their faces.

Soon after my daughter was born, we held a Family Dedication service at our church. Our pastor asked us to choose a gift that the church could present to us as part of the service. We chose a small clay figurine in which three children of different colors and races hug a globe and hold it up in their small hands. I keep it on a central shelf in our living room along with photographs of our daughter to remind me to keep striving to live in the tension between world-saving and family-preserving, to look always for the balance of serving this one amazing, mysterious child who has been gifted to us and all the amazing, mysterious children gifted to the world.

We must always be asking ourselves these questions: How do we order our personal and collective lives so that we allow for the unfolding of what God knitted together within our children, and the children of our churches, schools, and neighborhoods? How do we order our lives to encourage the unfolding of what God wove into children whom we will never know? What a tragic waste when we fail. What a great gift when we succeed. Fearful and wonderful indeed. Amen.



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Hanging In Through It All

BY JOY JORDAN-LAKE

Whether she's reaching out to at-risk youth in inner-city Boston, or treating the health of women recently released from slavery in Sudan, Gloria White-Hammond finds that she is "taking on things and getting through stuff that is very much not me as I've known me. I'd have to say, bottom line, it is really a sense of calling. Not me. Definitely not me!"

As a pediatrician, Gloria White-Hammond is the person you call, whether you're officially filed as her patient or just her friend, to check out carnival-colored rashes on your toddler's leg. I've done it myself, both when I lived across town from her and after I'd moved well over a thousand miles away, and can testify that both her cross-Boston and her long-distance diagnoses (followed by dutiful reminders to see my own doctor) have never failed to be right.

As one of the pastors of her African Methodist Episcopal church, she is the person you consult on structuring effective Christian education for children. I've seen her, with one flip of a well-manicured hand, shed her professional poise and don dark shades to rap along with youngsters at the front of a sanctuary, youngsters who seemed actually pleased—no, ecstatic—to be spending a healthy hunk of their Sunday in church.

Among the nation's most innovative community leaders, she and her husband Ray Hammond, who is also a minister and medical doctor, are the people you invite to speak on how to reach and support urban youth. One group she birthed in the mid-90s, "Do the Write Thing," began by helping at-risk girls write and speak honestly about what they were experiencing,

and has since spawned numerous other support and guidance groups.

And as a seasoned mother who has successfully raised two daughters to stable and productive adulthood, she is the person you beg for advice when your own parenting seems to have foundered, or when you've ceased to trust your own judgment on how well the schools and neighborhoods and churches around you are serving their children—and teaching

them how to serve.



Gloria White-Hammond *learned that obeying God's call means "rising above my own inhibitions, which are many, and by the power of the Spirit going on out there."*

So if she sounds like the All-'Round Answer Lady for the nation's urban young, well, maybe she is, though she laughs aside any image of herself as a spiritual, medical, or child development guru, and prefers to speak of all her

varied professional passions as simply following a calling, step by step.

The calling to pediatrics, she recalls, came early in her own childhood: "I always had the sense that I wanted to go into medicine. I was one of those readers who spent lots of time in the library, and when I was around eight years old, there was this blue book called 'How to Become a Doctor.' I remember reading that and then deciding, 'That's it! That's what I'll do!' Fortunately, I didn't have parents who said, 'Are you crazy? Do you know that you're black and you're a girl? None of that stuff goes together.'"

Though her parents knew a different reality, they never discouraged her ambitions as a child, "so at no point along the way did it ever occur to me that I couldn't do it, which is really strange, because I never saw any physicians who were black, and certainly none who were women. Maybe that was just God's protection upon me, so that it never occurred to me I couldn't do it. By the time I got to college it was clear that this might be kind of strange, but I also went in that early wave in 1968. That's when there were a number of black students who were coming into universities, and the climate was receptive to promoting and supporting blacks moving into colleges, and into medical school. Again, I was aware that it was a special kind of effort for me to go in, but even then the timing was such that nobody was telling me, 'You're crazy.'"

This desire to break new ground, to change the world, is often taught to children by parents, she observes, though that wasn't necessarily true in her own development. "We were an Air Force family, a black family in a largely white area, a white context. You just really learned not to make waves. That's a part of my own personality, and I even now can see how it constrains me: let's not make waves, let's not have people dislike you because you're the only black kid. If you're not nice to them, nobody will like

you, and nobody will play with you. I still have this sort of Disease to Please, and it's overboard because it's driven by those early years of not wanting to be left out.

"So, yeah, all this ministry and activism is very much out of the box in terms of how I was raised, which is not to say that my parents frowned on service: service was a nice thing. But it wasn't like we saw that modeled. And actually if you have raised eight, nine kids, that's service in and of itself. My daughters, on the other hand, were raised in an activist family, so the fact that they object to this and picket that, that's what they were raised to do, to see stuff and take exception to it, and figure out how to address it."

In her own professional life, White-Hammond has learned to "take exception" to society's assumption that children raised in difficult circumstances will inevitably repeat the mistakes of their family or peer group. Part of that challenge gets lived out through an inner-city Boston pediatric clinic serving primarily Latinos and African-Americans, "just really devoted families," as she sums them up. "The neighborhood has changed quite a bit," she notes, "because it's become so heavily gentrified, but our families continue to come—sometimes a great distance. I still just really love those people; I love the privilege of ministering in their lives.... It's the whole business of connecting.

"I think that's one of the reasons I love pediatrics: you get so involved with entire families. I can watch my families grow. Yesterday I had a conversation with one of my mothers whose daughter is a sophomore at Bryn Mawr. I'm so proud of her because I remember when I could hold this little preemie in my hand. I know her story; I can remember points along the way. That's just so special as a pediatrician, to be able to come alongside these families and touch them. So it's great, though not everybody does well obviously. I've got some horror stories along the way as well, but even then, somebody has got to stay beside the horror stories, too. Somebody has got to be there even for them because one day they're going to wake up, and they're going to get it. They need to be able to see somebody who connected with them even when they were in the gutter. And that's me."

Her voice drops an octave, becomes huskier as she recalls one of the tougher journeys. "One of my girls I'd known since she was in grade school. She was sexually abused by her stepfather and when the information was disclosed, her mom basically had to choose between the girl and the stepfather, and the mom chose the stepfather. So the girl was fostered for many years, and it was just horrible, horrible, horrible. And she was such a bright girl. She was a troubled teenager, you can imagine, but we got attached from when she was really young. My daughters and I went to a couple of her volleyball games just to encourage her, and then after she

graduated, that's when she started going way down the tubes. She was hooking for a while, just kind of here, there, and everywhere.

"She got a little bit into the church, a little bit out of the church, and about three years ago she had a child by a man she just kind of chose to be the father. But she's doing really well with the child. She's back in a good relationship with her mother, and the stepfather is gone—hopefully under the planet somewhere. I've seen her begin to regroup. She's not doing everything I'd like her to do: she's not saved and sanctified and in the church, but she's building a decent life for her and her child. She just had so much potential. I know if she'd had a different set of circumstances, she would have been in law school and she would have been a great lawyer, but it didn't work out that way. I have families like that, but then I have other girls who just make it. Sometimes, you don't know how they make it, but they do. That's what I really love, just being there in the valleys and the mountain highs."

But merely in her role as a pediatrician, White-Hammond could not always assist in those "valleys" for at-risk kids as fully as she longed to do. Her frustration helped create another avenue for helping them—and, in the process, probably helped clarify her own calling as a minister. "In my medical practice, I was seeing so many girls who seemed to be lost, and I was feeling like I wasn't able to do enough. I was feeling confined by the practice, since I only had them for a minute. While I had them, we could hear each other and we could meet each other in that place, but then they'd go off and there would be all those other people they would hear, people who would speak far more loudly and far more consistently than I. So, I looked for another venue to connect with them.

"It wasn't necessarily starting out with a plan that says, 'In January of 1994, you'll start a girls' group.' It wasn't like I planned to do it other than seeing a need, and trying to get a sense from God how to respond to the need.

"I was interested in writing as a way of expressing my feelings, and thought we might offer this as a tool for the girls. One of the members in our congregation was a professional writer, and so I sold the idea to her. Our initial plan was to meet on a weekly basis with the girls: we'd get them there, and we'd get them home again. As it turned out, it just became apparent that we would need to be even more involved in their lives, in a much more comprehensive way, so we started adding more and more components. That's the way it evolved.

"It's called 'Do the Write Thing,' but they do much more than write. We have two people at the church who are full-time doing the girls group. The director is a social worker, and brings a host of other skills to the ministry that I wouldn't necessarily have; there's another person who does drama with them. They're involved in a church program outside the

church, and two programs that are in two Boston public schools, and then another program for girls who are in the Division of Youth Services facilities. It's still going strong. I'm really grateful to God for that."

Without airbrushing the past, White-Hammond recalls some of the hard-won triumphs of *Do the Write Thing*: "In our very first group was a girl named Tanika, who definitely had her ups and down and ins and outs. When we first started working with her, she was probably about fourteen, so she might have been in the ninth grade. A lot of working with these girls is just hanging in through all of their changes, and not getting discouraged. There are plenty of places along the way to get discouraged because they're dropping out of school, getting high, and coming to church high. I remember she was involved with some guy, really a domestic violence case, a really troubled guy. When she was writing, you could hear: it was clear he was beating her. We had to get the word out that she was one of our girls, and that Reverend Hammond was looking for this guy, and that's how we had to deal with that.

"One summer we got the girls jobs in collaboration with our church, John Hancock Insurance, and the Boston police. Tanika eventually got her degree, went through Job Corp, and then went back to work for John Hancock. She's got benefits now, and people working under her. And she's kept in touch with her men-

tor. Just two weeks ago, she and her boyfriend organized a peace march at the city. I'm just so encouraged, because I remember this girl when she was just, you know, 'Is she going to make it? Are we going to make it?' But she's one of our girls; one of our success stories. You can't spot your success stories right away; they're not intuitively obvious. You just sometimes

have to wait—which is, of course, what God does for us. He waits until we get it, and keeps hanging in with us through it all. That's the definition of grace."

Gloria White-Hammond has one answer, and only one, to how a child like her grew up to be the woman she is, with all the richness and craziness of her life: "I have learned, and I don't hear God perfectly, but I have learned over the years how to discern his voice. I continue to learn how to just go ahead and do it: just go. It just kind of gets down to that, having

When working with at-risk youngsters, "you can't tell your success stories right away; they're not intuitively obvious. You just sometimes have to wait until they get it, keep hanging in through it all—which is, of course, what God does for us. That's the definition of grace."

this very clear sense of calling, rising above my own inhibitions, which are many, and by the power of the Spirit going on out there.”

By way of example, she points to her recent work in creating a non-profit organization assisting Sudanese women, recently released from slavery, with both health care (including HIV concerns) and micro-enterprise loans for starting their own businesses. “When I first went to Sudan, I certainly would not have had it in my spirit to plan to go back. It was sort of ‘Okay, we did this; we’ll pass the word and let people know what the situation is, and that will be that.’ But I had this uncanny sense that I needed to go back, and as time went on it was clear that this was the piece the Lord wanted me to take on.”

Again, she points to her childhood to contrast her personal tendencies with divine calling. “I don’t like getting dirty; I never did like getting dirty. I didn’t make mud pies as a kid because I didn’t like to get dirty. And I don’t like to eat chicken with my fingers because then your fingers get dirty. Dirt does not work for me. And of course here I am in Sudan: you can’t bathe for four or five days, and when you do, you’ve got a little basin with a couple inches of water, and that’s supposed to do the whole job. I don’t like using nasty toilets, but of course here in Sudan there are no toilets—it’s a hole in the ground. Bugs fly in and bugs fly out while you’re using it, so this cannot possibly be Gloria. I don’t do bugs. There are LOTS of bugs there.

“So in all these areas, I’m taking on things, and encountering things, and getting through stuff that is very much not me as I’ve known me. I’d have to say, bottom line, it is really a sense of calling. It’s not me. Definitely not me.”



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Children for Sale

BY JOY JORDAN-LAKE

Shannon Sedgwick, an attorney for International Justice Mission, has seen hell up close. Before IJM arrived, “purchasing” (that is, raping) children in Cambodia, for the sexual pleasure of grown, primarily Western men, was as simple as buying a bag of rice, perhaps easier.

Attorney Shannon Sedgwick has seen hell up close: little girls beaten, cigarettes extinguished on barely-past-baby skin, and children as young as five sold day after day, many times a day, for the sexual pleasure of grown, primarily Western men. “Purchasing” (that is, raping) children in Svay Pak, a brothel-infested neighborhood of Cambodia, is as simple as buying a bag of rice, Sedgwick explains, perhaps easier.

In recent years, the Cambodian government has faced intense international pressure to address child prostitution within its borders. But in a country where the average police officer earns less than thirty dollars a month and can make nearly ten times that in bribes from brothel keepers, bringing perpetrators to justice stands in direct conflict with the economic self-interest of those in power. Money, after all, talks. And it talks with terrible authority.

But Shannon Sedgwick left a lucrative job at a Dallas law firm in order to take on just that kind of mission impossible. She and her colleagues at International Justice Mission, an organization of attorneys and investigators, use individual countries’ own legal systems to document and help combat oppression, including forced prostitution, bonded child slavery, illegal detention and torture, sexual abuse, and widow’s lands rights cases.

For two years, IJM had been strategically preparing to “bring down” the Svay Pak brothels. Undercover investigators posed as sex tour guides arranging, on behalf of Western businessmen, for children to be bused to a “party” location in Phnom Penh, Vietnam. Meanwhile, according to the

plan, the Cambodian government would be pressured by IJM to release troops to assist in rescuing the children within twenty-four hours of the agreement in order to minimize time for tip-offs by government officials, soldiers, or police to the brothel keepers.

It was a good plan, and a clever one—but also delicate, incredibly vulnerable to exposure. A dangerous plan: for the IJM investigators and attorneys,



Shannon Sedgwick found “a greater understanding of what I was created for, what this life is all about” as she confronted the evil of child prostitution.

for the “Dateline NBC” crew who had gone undercover to document the sting, and not least of all, for the children.

A tour bus loaded with supposed pedophiles rode into Svay Pak to pick up the girls the brothel keepers had delivered to a designated house.

Secretly referred to as location “Alpha,” the house had been rented by IJM agents as a base of operation for a neighborhood sweep once the girls were rolling towards Phnom Penh, and thus the plan was in motion.

Sedgwick, along with forty soldiers supplied by the government, waited at the Phnom Penh house secured for the “sex party.” But here, at location “Bravo,” the intricately structured plan began to crumble.

“The time was getting late,” Sedgwick recalls, “and the troops with us were constantly on their cell phones speaking Khmer and I am certain tipping off the brothel keepers. The time kept passing and no bus, no girls. I was so tired. I had not had more than a couple hours of sleep a night for the last two weeks and it was hard to mask my fear that there were no girls coming.”

Sure enough, there was a leak: the brothel keepers had been informed.

“As soon as our head investigator started to notice [the brothel keepers] were moving girls out,” Sedgwick recounts, “they took the place down and secured location ‘Alpha,’ which had 14 girls in it between the ages of five and nine who’d been sold for sex. The NBC footage is surreal: you see yelling and screaming by my guys: ‘Save the girls!’ The girls were scattering and crawling through holes in the walls to get away. We lost five of those and ended up with nine of the babies.”

IJM, together with the troops assigned to Svay Pak, charged street to street, and door to door—kicking them down as they went. The sweep produced thirty-seven rescued girls and thirteen arrested perpetrators. The nine youngest children, those rescued first, were sent on a bus to the Ministry of Interior. Sedgwick, meanwhile, raced from Phnom Penh to be with what she terms “the babies.”

“When I got there they were all on a cement bench screaming and crying horrifically. I threw my backpack down and tried to put them all in my arms. We arranged to put them in a room where I continued to kiss them and hold them and wipe away their tears. Eventually they calmed down and by the time we transported them to Bravo (the safe house), they were singing, ‘Baby Shark’ and ‘Peanut Butter Jelly’ with me. Thank God for my days as a camp counselor. Now there are nine Vietnamese children whose entire English vocabulary is ‘Baby shark, duh-duh-duh’ and ‘Peanut Butter, Jelly,’ and ‘Shannon,’ of course. I could not be more honored.”

The older girls, those 12 to 16 years old, arrived at Bravo hours later. Unlike the “babies,” these girls were, not surprisingly, far less trusting of anyone, far less willing to be pulled under Shannon Sedgwick’s wing, into her circle of silly songs or a comforting embrace.

Sedgwick’s next several days were spent in “playing Mom” until IJM could secure safe homes for the girls and in pursuing legal justice. “The court system in Cambodia is crazy,” she insists. “There’s no concept of preservation of evidence or chain of custody.”

“The police came out and loaded an HP printer box full of the things they secured in the raid (sex toys and books, drugs and condoms) and they set it on the bus and went to get the prisoners. In the meantime, the bus just went driving around with our rented driver—and no police. Then we had to move the box so the prisoners could get in the door, and things were falling out. Crazy! Later the police were playing with the evidence and putting their water bottles and stuff in the box as we traveled to the courthouse. Crazy! Then I sat with the prisoners for two days at the court house, each day waiting until five when the judge goes home; since she didn’t get to us, she would just extend the detention order and we would repeat the same thing the next day.”

“[The rescued children] were all on a cement bench screaming and crying horrifically. I threw my backpack down and tried to put them all in my arms. We arranged to put them in a room where I continued to kiss them and hold them and wipe away their tears.”

Eventually, though, all the suspects were charged.

Sedgwick admits she was surprised to find anything left of childhood in the rescued children: “You see, I worried that these girls were ruined and our work would go more to save the next generation rather than this one. But I was wrong. They are children still. They play and sing with me. They crawl in my lap and kiss my cheeks. They cry at night when we put

them to bed. They have been damaged, but I believe there is significant hope for the younger ones for sure.”

In general, IJM considers the raid a victory: thirty-seven children were rescued. “But we missed many,” Sedgwick laments. “Many escaped; many were tipped off and secreted away. We had hoped for many more that we knew by name because of our undercover investigations: Lay and Me Lay.

Nom, Lan, and thirty-five others are free.

It was the closest I have ever come to seeing my God as I played with their beautiful smiling faces. I can only imagine what heaven looks like, but I did get a glimpse in Cambodia.

We missed them. And we missed “Eleben.” My heart wanted so desperately to ask her for her age in a place of safety and have her precious voice say to me with her big brown eyes, “Eleben.” But she is not safe. She is somewhere, maybe back in Vietnam, maybe hiding with her terrible captor somewhere in the village. But we don’t have her.”

Additionally, the thirteen arrests of the perpetrators

have badly damaged the sex trade of Svay Pak. Sedgwick is jubilant, but also realistic: “The pedophiles are already chatting on their [web]site, saying horrible things about IJM and our team and how now Svay Pak and most of Cambodia is closed for good.... Step by step we will see this evil conquered. We are here for the long haul.”

Richard Greenberg, the NBC “Dateline” senior producer to whom Sedgwick originally pitched the story, said he had never cried in his eighteen years on the job—before reporting this story.

Sedgwick’s cataloging of her own emotions following the rescue includes tears, exhaustion, and “unsurpassed joy.” A graduate of Baylor University’s law school, she describes herself as “an attorney who has been given a most unbelievable opportunity to save human life every day around the world. I am humbled and fascinated that I should be so lucky, that just by showing up, I am given a divine opportunity to bring justice to so many suffering and dying around the world.”

That passion to change the world, she says, has its roots in her own childhood, “for as long as I can remember...innate almost. I remember one trip my family took to Washington D.C. back when I was in middle school. We were outside a memorial and there was this older woman who had a sign, protesting something. I remember everyone was just ignoring her, and that made me mad because she had something she needed to say. I approached her and began to discuss with her whatever it was that was upsetting her. I talked with her for an hour while my family toured the

memorial. I've always wanted to fight for the underdog. To give a voice to those who have no voice."

But doesn't the atrocity she sees through her work—in this case committed for profit against children—become, sometimes, just too much to bear? "I have gained so much wisdom," she counters, "about the world, about human nature, about suffering and evil...the ugly things that I'm forced to face down.... The triumph in conquering these evil things also serves to deepen me by giving me a greater understanding of what I was created for, what this life is all about."

In the sexually abused bodies of five-year-old girls, Shannon Sedgwick has surely seen hell. But she has a different take on it: "Nom, Lan, and thirty-five others are free.... It was the closest I have ever come to seeing my God as I played with their beautiful smiling faces. I can only imagine what heaven looks like, but I did get a glimpse in Cambodia of all places. I am certain of that."

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

International Justice Mission produces video and printed study materials for youth groups and others. Visit their website at www.ijm.org.



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Caring for Children in Crisis

BY HELEN WILSON HARRIS

How should we respond to the pain and grief of our children in crises of sexual abuse, divorce, and death? These resources provide useful information and direction for churches that are willing to become the hands, arms, and kindness of Christ in loving His “little ones.”

My ten-year-old daughter was in grief overload. “Mama, it’s just too much death,” she said, for we had lost several close friends in the past year or so.

Part of that is my fault, because I have made sure that my children know older adults and spend time with them in their homes and in nursing facilities. Several of those adults have died recently. Moreover, she has had four children and a teacher in her school killed in accidents in the past year. My daughter has been to more funerals in a year than I attended in my entire youth. Add to that the death of her favorite cat, constant television images of a distant but very real war in Iraq, and ongoing concerns about terrorism, and my child was distraught.

My daughter’s trauma is not unique among children. The middle-school students in the Sunday School class which I teach, pray each week for dying family members, relatives deployed in the Middle East, and personal peace. One asked recently: “Mrs. Harris, is it wrong to be afraid?” Another student asked if we could talk in Sunday School about how to “deal with my evil stepmother.” A colleague of mine commented recently that more than half of the children in her congregation are the product of “broken homes.” The brokenness comes from damaged church relationships as well; the church has been challenged recently with disclosures of child sexual abuse within congregations. Loss of life, loss of family, loss of safety, and loss of innocence are crises for our children that demand our attention and care.

Theresa Huntley's *Helping Children Grieve: When Someone They Love Dies*, 2nd ed. (Augsburg Fortress, 2002 [1991]; 144 pp., \$12.99), R. Timothy Kearney's *Caring for Sexually Abused Children: A Handbook for Families & Churches* (InterVarsity Press, 2001; 139 pp., \$10.00), and Douglas Adams' *Children, Divorce and the Church* (Abingdon Press, 1992; 119 pp., \$12.95) provide families, lay volunteer helpers, and professional helpers with a fresh look at childhood grief and wise advice about congregational care for children in crisis. These three brief but pertinent guides are written with a Christian worldview, but from different professional discipline perspectives. Theresa Huntley writes as a clinical social worker who has hospital experience with dying and grieving children. Dr. R. Timothy Kearney, a clinical psychologist and theologian, writes from the perspective of a community mental health professional. Douglas Adams, Senior Minister at South Side Christian Church in Lima, Ohio writes from his experience as a child whose parents divorced, and whose needs for information and community were not met by his pastor and church.

THE CRISIS OF DIVORCE

The word "crisis" understates the exigency of divorce in our country. Search the internet for "Children and Divorce" and you will find several sites offering easy, online divorces. Thousands of children are the subjects of custody orders; close to fifty percent of children spend at least part of their youth in single-parent homes. For many children, the challenge of their parents' divorce is only somewhat mitigated by remarriage. In *Children, Divorce and the Church*, a book in the Creative Leadership Series edited by Lyle E. Schaller of the Yokefellow Institute, Pastor Douglas Adams recalls the devastation he felt as a child when his father left the family. Adams was further wounded when the pastor came to their home and offered support to his mother, but ignored him and his siblings. He makes a strong case for the role of the church and the pastor in ministering to the children of divorce: "If my pastor had stopped to talk to me that summer afternoon when my dad left, maybe my life would have been different today" (p. 115). Adams discusses the impact of divorce upon children and encourages parents, extended family, and congregational families to provide care for them. He recommends preparation, information, clarification, and ongoing discussion with children in families dealing with divorce.

Adams urges pastors who are counseling divorcing parents to equip them to support and nurture their children. He advocates giving information to children that prepares them to handle family changes, and for involving children in decisions that affect the whole family. While the work is helpful, one limitation of this book is its narrow scope. For the most part, Adams addresses divorces that mirror his own family's experience. While some of his suggestions are generalizable, others are not. The reader should consider other references as well that address a broader

range of circumstances and responses. For example, when there is neglect and abuse by a parental figure, ongoing contact with that parent must be limited by safety concerns. Additionally, care must be taken not to focus too much on a child's choice of custodial parent, thus leaving them torn between two parents. Adams paints with a fairly broad brush the recommendations he makes. Though the general themes of preparation, support, and communication are applicable in most situations, a number of the guidelines are narrowly directed to experiences similar to the author's. Finally, Adams wisely recommends that congregations offer support groups to children of divorce. (The book includes support group guidelines and a list of additional resources.) But the importance of recruiting professionals who are both knowledgeable and experienced in working with children and loss is not emphasized.

THE CRISIS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Added to the crises of loss through death and divorce for our children is the crisis of loss of innocence. Discussion of child sexual abuse remains a taboo subject in most congregations; the church is markedly silent, though the topic is frequently the interest of television talk shows and docudramas. The media focus has been on the years of child sexual abuse by priests in the Catholic Church. Yet that information has come with the awareness that child sexual abuse is not just about male priests struggling with vows of chastity and with homosexuality; sexual abuse of children is perpetrated by adults of all faiths and no faith.

Timothy Kearney's courageous and well-written book, *Caring for Sexually Abused Children*, begins with an example of disclosure of sexual abuse to a staff member in a congregation. He takes on the very difficult issue of sexual abuse by ministers and church staff, and the broader issue of congregations dealing with the ramifications of child sexual abuse perpetrated by those outside of the church. Dr. Kearney is able to speak both the language of professional clinical practice and the language of the church.

Kearney displays broad knowledge of the legal definitions of child sexual abuse, yet balances this technical information with a moving treatment of the physical, behavioral, emotional, relational, and spiritual signs of sexual abuse. He makes the case that we need to pay more attention to children—looking intently for the signs that suggest abuse is about to happen, or has already happened—and to recognize that the perpetrator often uses the cloaks of religion, Scripture, and paternalism to accomplish the abuse. Kearney offers clear steps for ministers and congregational leaders dealing with a child who discloses sexual abuse, and information about the criminal and human services systems that respond to child sexual abuse. Skillful listening to disclosures, mandated reporting, managing information within the congregation, and negotiating the systems involved are all addressed with very specific guidelines and case examples.

An important contribution of Kearney's work is its careful treatment of ways that Christian communities can minister not only to abused children and their families, but also to their pastors and other professional caregivers. He contrasts the tendency toward labeling and gossip in churches, with the congregation's opportunity to be a model of grace for those dealing with the shame and guilt that accompany sexual abuse. Kearney assesses when challenges can be managed in the church and when referral for therapy is indicated. Victims wonder, "Where was God?" and "Why did He allow this?" Kearney explores the church's pastoral role in bringing spiritual healing gradually through worship, sacraments, and prayer. Because the impact of abuse is experienced over a long period of time, the church's ministry to victims must be long-term as well.

The strengths of *Caring for Sexually Abused Children* are the author's willingness to address honestly child sexual abuse occurring in the church, his treatment of methods to prevent abuse in the church, and his evaluation of techniques to recognize and address it when it occurs.

THE CRISIS OF DEATH

Adams and Kearney address the adjustment to loss that occurs in children experiencing divorce and suffering sexual abuse. The crisis of loss through death is the focus of Theresa Huntley's book, *Helping Children Grieve*. In this wonderfully written, forthright book, Huntley, a social worker with years of experience with dying and grieving children, gives practical information about the needs of dying children and their families. She includes case examples that are touching and instructive. This is not an in-depth theoretical treatise on children's grief, or a workbook for exercises with grieving children. It is, simply put, the basic information that adults need about the grief of children and how helping professionals and congregations can minister to children and their families through death and loss.

Huntley encourages us to educate young people about how death is a part of every life, and tells us how to respond to children when a loved one dies, while being sensitive to the child's age and ability to comprehend the permanence of death. Children are involved in multiple social institu-

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tions like schools, clubs, teams, and churches; adults and peers in all these institutions can play key roles supporting our children. This is the practical guidebook that belongs on every pastor's and teacher's bookshelf. It is not theoretical or contemplative, but is instructive and guided by the author's extensive experience and care.

A CARING COMMUNITY FOR "THESE LITTLE ONES"

As members of the church that follows the One who instructed us to "let the little children come to me" (Matthew 19:13), we must want to respond to and care for the pain of children. These three resources will add knowledge to our willingness. One of my favorite pictures when I was a child depicted Christ surrounded by children and had this caption:

I wish that His hands had been placed on my head,
That His arms had been thrown around me,
And that I might have seen His kind look when He said,
"Let the little ones come unto me."

Jemima T. Luke (1841)

I submit that His hands have been placed on my head by a loving pastor and his wife who were with me in the emergency room when a family member was critically injured. His arms have been thrown around me by Sunday School teachers and youth ministers at times when my life was in crisis. I have seen His kind look in the eyes of Christians in social work, psychology, and education who serve both in churches and in places of business. The church continues to be the hands, arms, and kindness of Christ in action. These resources provide us useful information and direction for loving Christ's "little ones."



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Nurturing Children in Faithfulness

BY BOB FOX

When we say children are “the church of the future,” we push them away from the center of the life of the congregation and imply they will become important only when they mature. These authors remind us that children are a key part of the church family right now. By shifting away from more impersonal, instruction-based models that predominate in Christian education, they urge us to nurture children’s faith through communal interaction and involvement.

The children who stream into our churches every week are brought by parents or other caregivers for a variety of reasons. Perhaps Dad and Mom simply desire a moment of peace or free childcare. Maybe they have some notion that contact with the church will be beneficial to a child’s socialization or psychological health. Others may want to hand over a child’s faith development and religious instruction to the “experts” who teach in the church. Still others may hope to partner with the community of the church to train and disciple their children in a holistic fashion.

These children, regardless of the reasons they are brought to church, are a sacred trust for the congregations that receive them. The three books examined here urge the community of faith to take the developing souls of children more seriously. In *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 2nd ed. (Morehouse Publishing, 2000 [1976]; 143 pp., \$14.95), John H. Westerhoff III questions

many of the assumptions in the educational models appropriated by the church from the secular sphere. Marva J. Dawn's *Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997; 256 pp., \$16.00) urges the church to be directed more toward leading children into the radical demands of faith and away from the siren calls of culture. While Westerhoff is concerned with method and Dawn is focused on result, Catherine Stonehouse in *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Baker Books, 1998; 237 pp., \$18.99) describes child development theory in both secular and religious contexts.

Two common threads run through these works. These writers are convinced that the church has not been intentional enough in meeting the needs of the children in its trust, and they warn that the very future of the church is at stake when it considers their education and faith development. Furthermore, they are convinced that a faithful *community* must play an integral role in nurturing children's faith. With these commonly held presuppositions, each author in a distinctive voice offers prescriptions for nurturing faith in children.

HOW IS FAITH GROWN?

Instructively, the problems John Westerhoff identified in *Will Our Children Have Faith?* over a quarter of a century ago continue to plague the church. His forming question is simple, "Is schooling and instruction in a Christian community necessary for education?" (p. 17). The church, he suggests, wrongly follows secular models of education that emphasize schools and instruction. This leads congregations to classroom-teach religion (a knowledge-based approach) to passive children, but to ignore the development of active faith (which is interior and interpersonal). Children, as a result, learn a great deal about the Christian religion but do not receive instruction on how to grow in their faith.

Westerhoff proposes a very different educational model, "a community of faith-enculturation paradigm," in which children learn their faith through experience with and practical involvement in a faithful community (p. 45). The community's task is to relate the faith, which it imparts to children, to the totality of human experience and the reality of the divine presence. Its goal in faith formation should be conversion, in which faith given is transformed into faith owned and incorporated (p. 36). The "ideal" church to promote the growth of children, he notes, is unified in its essentials, small enough to encourage real relationships, multi-generational, and formed by a variety of spiritual gifts. Ritual, experience, and faithful action are all ways that such a community inculcates faith.

Because the instruction-based model that predominates in Christian education for children is too impersonal and abstract, Westerhoff recommends shifting to a method based on communal interaction and involvement. If an individualistic instructional method is inadequate as a way to

explore questions of faith, perhaps the better guiding query is “What does it mean to be Christian *together*?” He identifies four stages of faith: “experienced faith” that is an inactive encounter with the faith of others; “affiliative faith,” which is choosing to belong with a community of faith; “searching faith” that embraces doubts and experimentation; and “owned faith” (known traditionally as conversion) in the sense that faith possesses its holders. Children at each of these developmental points require different types of educational experiences. The final chapter of Westerhoff’s book sketches ways that a church might restructure its educational paradigm and programs in order to better address the faith stages of its members.

Will Our Children Have Faith? is a valuable resource for anyone attempting to radically reshape a congregation’s educational program. Updates at the conclusion of each chapter in the reissue edition (Morehouse Publishing, 2000) reflect both the developments in the author’s thought as well as the church’s current situation.

WHAT DOES A CHRISTIAN LOOK LIKE?

While Westerhoff writes from the perspective of the mainline denominational traditions, Marva Dawn’s *Is It a Lost Cause?* takes a more evangelical perspective. Her guiding conviction is that the church should be an alternative community to the world in which it exists. The purpose of Christian education is to lead children away from the world and into a life-changing discipleship in the community of the church.

The world outside of the church, Dawn says, is governed by powers and principalities, and it suffers the pain and moral malaise of the postmodern. Our ministry to this distress is complicated, and it can easily be compromised by our tendency to project problems outside our selves and our community. For instance, we would be naïve

to identify these needs, marked by symptoms such as violence and casual sex, as belonging only to other people outside the church, and thus to deny that they are also our problems. The pain and temptations of the world are prevalent even in our churches and can easily ensnare our children.

The answer to the beguiling call of the world is to seek instead the heart of God, which is revealed in a variety of ways. Scripture reveals God’s heart through the form of a meta-narrative, an all encompassing

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story of how God has addressed the needs of the world. God's heart also is revealed through the church as an alternative society; it not only provides community, which is a desperate need in the postmodern world, but also teaches its members how to live in Christian relationship with each other. Through the church's true worship and the love and nurture of pastors and parents, God reveals his intentions for humanity.

Empowered with God's direction, the church can aggressively confront the world and can help its children de-emphasize cultural conditioning. In practical terms this means challenging the media and its enticing portrayals of consumerism, violence, and sexual promiscuity. For instance, children need to be shown that pain is a part of life and can have value, rather than being taught by the media that commercially-provided ease and comfort is the point of life.

Dawn's answer to the title question, "Is it a lost cause?" is a qualified "no." If the church aggressively seeks to produce counter-culture children, then it will recover the heart of God for its children. Her book would be a good candidate for group study; thought-provoking discussion questions at the end of each chapter encourage readers to come to their own conclusions about the dominant worldviews of our culture.

HOW DO CHILDREN GROW?

In *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, Catherine Stonehouse applies to a Christian context the important insights from child development research. Her very readable summaries of the generally-accepted theories of human development can help us carefully accept, qualify, or reject their application in the church's efforts to educate its children.

Developmental approaches, Stonehouse argues, are a way to understand each child's progress towards "the goal of spiritual formation... [which is a] maturing faith and a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ, through which we become more like Christ in the living of our everyday lives in the world" (p. 21). She begins by surveying Scripture for examples of the education of children, and discovers that tradition, ritual, symbol, and community are biblical models for the journey of faith formation.

After summarizing the work of Erik Erickson on the psychosocial development of human beings, Stonehouse proposes that "human development and spiritual formation are not two separate, unconnected processes" because both spheres address trust, hope, will, and purpose (p. 63). Applying the theory of intellectual development proposed by Jean Piaget, she urges Christian educators to allow the differing stages of a child's cognitive development to determine the approach they take in forming the child's faith. She then considers Lawrence Kohlberg's research into the role of community in the moral development of persons; the community of the church should model and provide a place for children to explore the moral grounds that underlie actions.

These models of general human development are not the only important factors according to Stonehouse. While young children may not be cognitively ready to form a picture of God, they do have an image of God based upon their experiences with their parents and caregivers. This image becomes fully developed through nurturing into a mature conception. She concludes her survey by examining James Fowler's account of faith development as the defining of a center of value, an image of power, and a shared master story.

She utilizes these developmental insights in a practical model for worship that includes silence, story, and response (which involves constructive application of the lesson to craft materials). Stonehouse views children as pilgrims on a journey. Though their paths are varied, they encounter dangers in the disintegration of extended families and modern culture, but support and resources in the blessings of community.

Stonehouse's book provides an excellent review of the vast field of child development theory. The results of this research are very helpful for any adult in understanding the needs and abilities of the children they serve.

A COMPELLING PICTURE IN THREE PARTS

Often we speak of the children of the church as "the church of the future." Yet this attitude pushes children away from the center of the life of the present church, suggests they have little to offer now, and implies they will become important only at some later point when they are mature. These authors remind us that children are a part of the church family of the present. How we nurture them today will determine if the church has a future at all.

Each author calls on churches to be more intentional in their education of children; though their approaches are different, each ultimately affirms the importance of the community in faith development. When read together, these books will initiate a helpful conversation on the role of the church in nurturing children in faithfulness.



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