

Children and the Church
The Difference the Covenant Makes
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Introduction: Paul tells us not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:1-2). One area we need to do this is with respect to our children. How we view them, according to Scripture, will have a significant impact on how we nurture and evangelize them in the church and in our families.

I) How do we view the children of the church?

They are holy (1 Corinthians 7:14). This does not mean that they are necessarily regenerate, but it does mean that they are the objects of God's special attention and blessing. By virtue of the faith of even one believing parent, God sets them aside—and means for us to set them aside as well.

¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. (1 Corinthians 7:14)

II) How do we treat, nurture, and evangelize them in the church and in our families?

1) We warmly receive them. Because they are holy to God, they belong in the arms of his Son. And his Son is found in the church, where he is honored, listened to, and worshipped. Jesus is not less indignant when today's church keeps children at arm's length than he was when his disciples did.

¹³ And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. (Mark 10:13-14)

2) We baptize them. By baptizing them we agree with God's declaration that they are "holy," and we warmly welcome them as such. We set them aside for life in the church not in order to get God to set them aside—but because God has already set them aside. We simply agree with him when we bring them for baptism.

³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." (Acts 2:37-39)

- 3) **We let them model for us.** Children are not models of innocence (banish that thought), but they are models for us of dependence (there is a lot that they cannot do). They know how to say, “Help!”

*Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”¹⁶ And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.
(Mark 10:15-16)*

- 4) **We welcome them as the church’s responsibility—not just the responsibility of the parents.** Jesus did not rebuke the parents for keeping their children from him; he rebuked the disciples. The one social organization that will outlast the end of the world is not the nuclear family. Nor is it marriage. It is the church. Parents have a particularly intense responsibility regarding their kids—but it is not uniquely theirs. “It takes a church to raise a child.”

⁴ "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

Notice that the “you” in verse 5 (etc.) is not just the parents. It is “Israel”—the people of God—the church.

- This is why we have a Sunday school program and children’s worship—in which many people in addition to the parents are involved.
- It is why, whenever we baptize a child, we ask the congregation, “Do you promise to assist the parents in the Christian nurture of their child.”
- It is why, once a month, we have the children in worship with us for the first part of worship. It can be distracting and not always convenient. But that does not matter, because it is good.

You don’t have to be a parent to have children. We all need to understand and embrace this—and have it show up in ministry to children by non-parents, as well as the inclusion of non-parents into family life (Ideally our home fellowship groups should all have mixes of people with kids and people without kids).

- The most effective thing Jeannie and I did with our kids in their early teens was to take them to FOCUS camps, where let them hear about Jesus from a whole bunch of leaders who were not their parents. “Dad, you are cool. But those college leaders—they are really cool.”

5) **Evangelizing our children:**

- We believe that our children need to be born again—but we do not obsess about knowing precisely when that happens. Rather than giving them a formula for

“how to become a Christian”, we pray for reality to set into their hearts in age specific ways. What matters pre-eminently about the new birth is not that we have a birth certificate with a date on it, but that we are alive. Seeing things this way is tremendously important for a number of reasons

- It keeps everybody from resting in “a decision” that was made some time in the past, and instead keeps everyone resting today in a Person.
- It also keeps kids, who are impressionable, from simply caving in to adult pressure to “make the decision for Jesus—a decision that can very easily be nothing more than a humanly imposed act with no real meaning.
- The covenant protects us from thinking that we somehow save our children or that our children somehow save themselves. As Jonah learned, “Salvation is of the Lord.”
- If by “evangelizing” our children we mean, “persuading them to become Christians”, we do not really do this—not unless our children give strong evidence of apostasy (they are “innocent until proven guilty” with respect to being insiders—not the other way around). If by “evangelizing” them we mean that we keep showing them the meaning and benefits of the gospel, then we evangelize them all the time—just as we do ourselves. (I preach the gospel every Sunday—by which I mean, I present the sufficiency and the glory and the lordship of Christ—because the church family, the insiders, need to be refreshed in the gospel all the time. So it is with our children.)

6) Nurturing our children

- We treat our children as “little Christians” (insiders, loved by Jesus, who need like all of us to see Jesus more clearly and follow him more nearly and love him more dearly), not as little non-Christians” (outsiders who need to be converted).
 - Because we see them as little Christians from the moment of their baptism, we do not look for “one big decision for Jesus.” Instead we look for a whole series of little decisions to trust and obey, as they walk through life with us at home and in the broader church. To trust and obey is for our growing children a way of life, just as it is for us. It is not loaded into a crisis moment.
 - We gently expect them to exercise faith rather than demanding that they exercise faith.
- We invite them, as soon as they can speak, to pray the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father, who art in heaven.” We teach them Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd.” We do not say to them—“Now, until you accept Jesus into your heart, you are not allowed to say “Our Father”—since John 1:12 says that we become children of God only after we receive Jesus.” (Everybody does this intuitively—but people who understand the covenant have a clear understanding of why they do it).

- We welcome them to the Lord’s Table as early as possible—not demanding a fully adult understanding of the gospel, but looking for age appropriate trust and obedience.
 - Remember, the Lord’s Table is a means of grace—a gift from Jesus designed to help strengthen faith. If our children are “little Christians” then of course we want them to be nourished by “all the means of God’s appointment” (vow # 3, affirmed at every baptism)—one of which is the Lord’s Supper. 3 years old is not necessarily too young. Our son was 7.
 - We are talking about offering a communicants’ class—but this should not be seen as something that bars a covenant child from the Lord’s Table until he is old enough to participate in it. Our policy is that parents should bring their children to the elders whenever they think they are expressing age appropriate faith in Jesus so that the session can welcome them to the Table as soon as possible. For such kids a communicants class, offered later, can serve as a refresher and a deepener of their faith.

- The covenant keeps us from thinking that what really matters about the Christian life is narrowly defined as a “salvation decision”. It reminds us instead that the what really matters is a way of life, wherein we and our children discover what it means that we live in God’s world—a world into which he sent his Son for the purpose of renewing everything. A life characterized by a continuing series of decisions to trust and obey is a life in which we are continually making decisions about the reign of Jesus Christ in everything—not just in “religious” things.

⁴ "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

The picture here is one of walking together through life in its fullness. It is a picture of constant and varied instruction in every conceivable venue—and it assumes that a whole host of decisions, large and small are being made.

One of the great tragedies in the church is that we do not help our children’s spiritual development keep pace with their social and intellectual development. This breeds compartmentalization in our children—so that they begin to think that certain things are the domain of Jesus (like prayer and Bible memory) and other things (an increasingly large number of things) are neutral. This leads to the faith being boring because it is irrelevant and can foster deep hypocrisy in children.

2 stories:

1) The first time I took Allen fishing became the occasion for talking about the cultural mandate as he looked with horror at the mackerel squirming off the end of a hook.

2) When our kids reached movie going age and we began to face the fact that sooner or later they would go to whatever movies they wanted to, we made a deal with them. We would pay for the movies if they would let us come with them and talk about what we saw with them. They accepted the cash and would roll their eyes at the ways that we constantly sought to tie the themes of the movies into a Christian way of thinking.