

WHEN CAN A PERSON, ESPECIALLY A CHILD, HAVE A GENUINE CONVERSION EXPERIENCE?

By Dr. Glenn A. Jent¹

When can a person, especially a child, have a genuine conversion experience? In words typical of my denomination (Baptist), when does a person reach “the age of accountability”? There are many phrases that indicate such a readiness for conversion. As an evangelical Christian, I am strongly committed to the belief that no one is nurtured into the Kingdom of God following natural birth. Rather, I am committed to the biblical teaching of Jesus Christ that a person must be born again to become a child of God. In John 3:3, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” That is a Scripture principle that is non-negotiable. However, the important concern in this study is to identify, if possible, when a child reaches this time, this age of accountability —i.e., when it may be born again.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

There was a study that was conducted in a group composed of Southern Baptist evangelists, pastors, ministers of education, ministers of music, seminary and college professors, counselors, theologians, church children’s workers, denominational workers, and parents. Although the focus of the study had to do with children and worship, there was some discussion of children and conversion, which led to some significant findings:

Only slightly over 4 percent of the group were willing to say that a church should assume any child lost before age nine. Some were unwilling to say a person is lost before age fifteen to sixteen! And about 30 percent of those responding did not attempt to state an age at which a person should automatically be considered lost. Eighty-nine percent of the respondents agreed that many children were joining the churches in their

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denomination without having had a conversion experience. About 85 percent of these felt that children were interpreting some other emotional or inner experience as conversion.²

The writer concluded, “When one considers these responses, he is faced with at least one conclusion: People who are in good position to know and understand children and conversion recognize the pitfalls in attaching accountability to a given age.”³ The conclusion certainly appears to be valid that there is danger in specifying any age with reference to the age of accountability. The phrase itself may create the impression that there is some specific **age** for accountability because of the words “the age.” It would be more accurate to use “the time of accountability,” but my denomination has consistently used “age” instead of “time.” Regardless, the issue of when a child can have a genuine conversion experience remains problematic for parents, teachers, and churches.

Other Christian denominations may use different phrases, but they all have a similar concept in dealing with the development of children and admission into active participation in the life and ministry of the church. James Smart, a Presbyterian minister, describes this experience as a time when a person “awakens to self-consciousness” and “is confronted with a contradiction within himself.”⁴ Smart’s “contradiction” is the recognition that one is acting according to the direction of the world rather than the direction of God. Regardless of the phrase used, the importance of the concept is unaltered. In evangelical circles, such phrases describe readiness for conversion.

What Is Conversion?

Jack Fennema describes conversion this way:

Conversion is a gift of God’s grace. His Holy Spirit works within persons to redirect them toward the Truth. Conversion can take place quite suddenly as with Paul on the road to

²Eugene Chamberlain, *When Can a Child Believe?* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman, 1973), 34-35.

³*Ibid.*, 35.

⁴James D. Smart, *The Teaching Ministry of the Church: An Examination of the Basic Principles of Christian Education* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 159.

Damascus (Acts 9). It can also take place over a longer period of time in a gradual manner (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15; Isa 49:1-6) with a culmination point reached at the “age of understanding.” In both cases a public acknowledgment is called for (Romans 10:9-10). Conversion, for the child reared in a Christian environment, is often experienced as a gradual process. It is a daily responding to God; it is a gradual growth in the things of God. When a child is young, his insight is more limited (1 Cor 13:11), and his response can reflect only that degree of insight. But at a particular level or stage in his spiritual growth (Luke 2:52) he will gain the degree of insight or understanding necessary for him to make a decision and commitment of a personal nature. The age of understanding and accountability is reached when the pieces of the pattern or big picture fit together or seem to make sense. At that point in time he becomes fully accountable before God for the response he makes to the claims of Christ on his life. He has come to the age of understanding the truth; his responsibility, then, is to act upon that truth.⁵

This explanation sets forth what can and most likely will happen if parents and church workers will do their part in preparing the child for the encounter with God. Of course, ultimately, the Holy Spirit must do His part in convicting and bringing the child to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

The view that Paul’s conversion was sudden is a fairly typical understanding of that experience. It is more likely that Paul had been thinking about his relationship with Christ for some time —e.g., Jesus said to him, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:20). This statement implies that his conscience had been bothering him. My experience as a pastor and as an education minister/professor agrees with Fennema’s statement that sudden conversion experiences are less common than those that result after much nurturing which leads to serious reflection —particularly among those who attend church.

⁵Jack Fennema, *Nurturing Children in the Lord: A Study Guide for Teachers on Developing a Biblical Approach to Discipline* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1978), 22-23.

WHAT MUST BE KNOWN AND UNDERSTOOD FOR CONVERSION TO OCCUR?

William Hendricks identifies several essential beliefs that must be understood if one is to become a child of God: “It is impossible to have saving faith in the fullest sense without certain minimal beliefs and awareness of those definitive acts which brought Christianity into being.”⁶ He lists five facts that must be understood and believed: (1) “Jesus came from God . . .” (2) “Men killed Christ.” (3) “Yet, Christ’s death was according to God’s plan.” (4) “Christ is raised.” (5) “God through Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to bear witness to what God in Christ has done for men.”⁷ He insists that anyone who would make a life commitment to Jesus Christ (including a child) must hear, understand, accept, and have faith in the God who caused these events to occur. Such faith must be preceded by a genuine repentance of, or sorrowing for, one’s sins.⁸ In relating these matters to a child, he writes,

I must be asked whether a child can understand, believe, and accept these things. This of course depends. It depends upon the child, his ability, his age, his capacity to grasp thoughts and make decisions. It depends on the language used to express these ideas and the illustrations used to clarify them. It depends on the family in which the child is reared and the interest of the parents in his education in things religious.⁹

Many variables influence when a child may become ready.

Some of my students have pointed out to me that one such variable is culture. In some cultures, particularly in the Asian setting, some children are dependent upon parental influence much longer than in most Western cultures. Thus, these children may not be ready for conversion until a later age when they do become more independent in thought and action.

⁶William Hendricks, “The Age of Accountability,” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle, 84-97 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman, 1970), 91.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 91-92.

⁹Ibid., 92.

A child would rarely, **if ever**, be ready for a conversion experience in early childhood (birth to five). At the same time, it is true that children in advanced countries are maturing more rapidly than in the past. Children mature at different ages and respond to external stimuli in different ways, especially in different cultures. Thus, it is not reasonable to try to set a certain age as the time for all children to be ready for the conversion experience. Children who have not reached this age of accountability are not yet responsible beings before God and are protected by His loving mercy; therefore, parents should not be particularly concerned about their young children. A child in the early childhood years is not yet ready for conversion, although such a decision may be possible in later childhood.

How Should a Child Be Judged?

One of the dangers in working with children is that it is easy for adults to misjudge the child's readiness. It is vitally important that parents and church workers allow children to be children, especially in early childhood. I believe that we violate God's laws of creation and recreation when we ignore a child's natural development. Unfortunately, the Bible offers little guidance concerning a child's readiness for conversion.

WHAT DO THE SCRIPTURES SAY?

In the Old Testament, children attended at least some worship activities; but "there is a total absence of provisions about admitting children to full religious status."¹⁰ The Old Testament is silent about when a child might be able to have a conversion experience and offers no guidelines. The New Testament does not offer much help, either. William Coble, a retired New Testament seminary professor, says, "Two facts stand out quickly: (1) the New Testament says very little about children . . . ; (2) what the New Testament does say gives us very limited instruction about the what, how, or why of proper Christian methods of meeting children's spiritual needs."¹¹ Thus, we may conclude that the Bible offers little insight or few guidelines in this

¹⁰Roy L. Honeycutt, Jr., "The Child Within the Old Testament Community," in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle, 20-35 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman, 1970), 20.

¹¹William B. Coble, "New Testament Passages about Children," in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle, 36-54 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman, 1970), 37.

critical matter. Although it is true that children were present in some worship activities in both Old and New Testament settings, the Bible is remarkably silent about the child's rights and responsibilities as to membership and age of entrance into full participation.

WHAT IS THE CHILD'S TRUE CAPACITY?

Because of a child's use of religious terminology, many adults think it understands more than it does. Both parents and Christian workers, including pastors and teachers, need to be aware that a child uses many words it does not understand. Such misunderstanding leads many adults to assume that the child is ready to have a conversion experience, whereas the child may have no understanding of the essential details of the faith and may not have for some time to come.

This lack of understanding of religious language and of essential concepts (such as sin, repentance, faith) makes any evangelizing efforts at this age level premature and counter-productive. Hendricks asks some serious questions concerning those who try to evangelize children:

Are we forcing guilt on the young which is a guilt born from breaking the rules of our particular society rather than actually rejecting God in Christ? Are the "sins" children confess born of their despair in estrangement from God or are they born from the fear of displeasing those who demand a certain culturally conditioned way of life?¹²

Hendricks believes that "the meticulous searching of the 'conscience' of a very young child has no biblical precedent."¹³ Unfortunately, some uninformed people actually do that, resulting in a negative impact upon little children.

Because many adults do not take the time to talk with a child, they do not know what a child is thinking or understand how a child thinks. This lack of understanding leads to improper assumptions when they hear a child using "faith language," or the religious vocabulary used by an older person.

¹²Hendricks, 90.

¹³Ibid., 90-91.

When we remember that a child in the first half of the later childhood years (ages six to eleven) is typically learning how to read, write, add and subtract, memorize the multiplication tables, color, draw, and other similar elementary skills, we are more likely to see the child as a child—having childish skills and childlike thinking ability. It is incomprehensible that an adult should expect that a normally-developing child that is learning to tie its shoes and color within the lines should understand spiritual truths that are essential to the salvation experience. A child this age “tends to regard the Bible as a supernatural book, dealing with holy people in a holy land, clad in special holy clothes, all in a special holy period of time.”¹⁴ The child may actually think of the Bible as a fairy tale, similar to Disney’s *Aladdin*, rather than what it actually is. Therefore, in spiritual development (as in all matters), adults are wise to consider what is going on in all of the child’s life.

Another danger is for parents (and other adults) to assume that a child is more intelligent and, therefore, more spiritually developed than it is. They are often misled by the child’s faith language, but there are other reasons for this phenomenon. Although the parents themselves may be average in intellect, they tend to think their own children are bright. Quite naturally, love makes parents a little partial. Another reason is that parents often measure their child by their own childhood or by the few children that they may have or know. Then, too, parents desire to find any evidences of spiritual growth on the part of the child.¹⁵ Wise parents and teachers know that they can be deceived by such reasoning and seek to allow the Holy Spirit to work at His own pace in bringing about the conversion experience when the child is truly ready.

Regardless of the culture in which a child grows up, parents must understand that it is only as the child begins to think independently for itself that it truly becomes emotionally and intellectually ready for the conversion experience. Any commitment prior to that time will likely be based upon some false premise or improper motivation.

¹⁴Ronald Goldman, *Readiness for Religion: A Basis for Developmental Religious Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965; New York: Seabury, 1968), 37-38.

¹⁵Chamberlain, 40-41.

ARE THE BIBLICAL ARGUMENTS OF THE PROPONENTS OF MOST CHILD EVANGELISM VALID?

Having served more than twenty-five years as a pastor, four years as an education minister, and six years as a teacher of Christian Education in a seminary setting, I have developed serious reservations about any form of child evangelism. I have already indicated that the Bible is largely silent about the child's relationship to the church, and especially with reference to child evangelism. Nevertheless, persons who emphasize child evangelism believe that the Bible supports that view. For example, Jimmy Ervin proclaims in typically exaggerated fashion that the Bible is not silent on this issue. He writes, "Someone has said that every book in the Bible except five deals directly with child evangelism, and even those five deal indirectly with the subject."¹⁶ He offers no evidence to support that claim because there is none. Such dishonest scholarship usually says "someone" but never gives a name, because no honest Bible scholar would want to take credit for such a statement. Ervin uses Matthew 18:1-6 as the basis for his argument for child evangelism. He says that this passage proves that Jesus encouraged child evangelism. However, in this passage, Jesus was using a child as an **example** for the basis of an **adult's** conversion experience—not for the child's conversion. The statement in verse six that the child believed in Jesus does not necessarily imply a saving faith. The Bible says that the demons also believe—and shudder (see James 2:19). Significantly, the age of the child is not mentioned. Therefore, the use of this passage to support child evangelism is not only weak, but unjustified; and no right-thinking, honest Bible scholar would do so. Similarly, other arguments for evangelism in early childhood and in the first half of later childhood collapse when proponents of child evangelism use the Scriptures to support their views. The Bible simply does not support child evangelism. Rather, it encourages nurture that prepares for conversion.

¹⁶Jimmy Ervin, "Child Conversion" (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1983), 6.

WHEN CAN CONVERSION OCCUR?

How Do Developmental Differences Affect the Time of Conversion?

No one needs to tell parents that each child is different, for they discovered that truth the minute they had a second child. Although all children are alike in some ways, they are different in others. The rate of development is different from one child to the next. Max Price points out three factors that affect this rate of development: (1) “*His heredity*—the innate differences he inherited from both parents”; (2) “*His environment*—his surroundings, especially the conditions or influences that affect his growth and development”; and (3) “*His subjective response to life’s events*—each child interprets what happens to him, and each child has his own special reaction to what happens.”¹⁷ Similarly, Ronald Goldman says, “In language, in skills in the basic school subjects, physically, emotionally and socially there are wide variations. Indeed these wide variations are becoming more marked during this period [age seven to nine].”¹⁸ Those variations become even more remarkable in the adolescent years.

WHAT DO SCHOLARS SAY ABOUT THE CHILD’S LEARNING PROCESSES?

Research centering upon a child’s learning processes indicates four things: (1) “The most rapid period of intellectual growth occurs before age eight.” (2) “It has become increasingly evident that educators can no longer view the child as being born with a fixed intelligence.” (3) “Children lacking opportunities to develop in an enriched environment also lag behind intellectually.” (4) “The environment will have its greatest impact during these first eight years.”¹⁹ Thus, parents and teachers must work at providing a rich, stimulating environment for the child, particularly in early childhood and the first half of later childhood. This kind of environment stimulates interest and encourages development in the learning skills. It

¹⁷Max B. Price, *Understanding Today’s Children* (Nashville, Tennessee: Convention Press, 1982), 17.

¹⁸Ronald Goldman, 102.

¹⁹George S. Morrison, *Early Childhood Education Today* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1976), 5-6.

is also instrumental in shaping the child's thinking processes, attitudes, and beliefs—things that remain particularly difficult to change for the remainder of the child's life, especially when taught by the parents. Although a young child may not be capable of having a conversion experience, the preparation of the child's attitudes and beliefs should predispose the child to expect an encounter with Jesus Christ. Thus, such preparation can help establish a climate in which the child will expect an encounter with God; and the child will be more likely to respond favorably to God's call.

SHOULD EACH CHILD BE TREATED THE SAME?

Every child is different. Each child progresses through the various learning stages at its own individual pace; and parents and teachers should not push, or rush, the child toward the next stage, even if another child advanced to that stage at an earlier age. Each child's timing will be based upon factors that are different from every other child, and the child should be allowed to progress naturally toward the conversion experience. G. R. Beasley-Murray offers these words of encouragement to parents and teachers:

We have ground for hope that through the intercessions of family and church, and the children's participation in worship and instruction at home and in church, they may be spared the prodigal's bitter experience in the far country and respond in their early years to the love of God in Christ.

There are the best of reasons for refraining from subjecting little children to evangelistic pressures designed for awakening the consciences of hardened sinners. But we should also beware of underestimating the ability of a growing child to respond to the gospel and to grasp the essential significance for life.²⁰

SHOULD PARENTS AND TEACHERS AUTOMATICALLY ACCEPT A CHILD'S CONVERSION EXPERIENCE?

Parents and teachers should be cautious about any evangelistic attempts to win a child, but they should not be surprised when the child eventually responds to the call of God. Still, the parent has

²⁰G. R. Beasley-Murray, "The Child and the Church," in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle, 127-41 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman, 1970), 138.

responsibility to examine and question what the child has done. If parental questioning reveals no undue pressure was applied, then they can rejoice with the child.

Another consideration for parents and teachers is that the different denominations hold differing views about conversion.

How Do Denominational Differences Affect the Time of Conversion?

Different denominations may not all emphasize the conversion experience, but nearly all of them specify an age at which a child may begin to participate fully in the life and ministry of the church. These ages vary widely. The accountable age for Lutherans is ten to fifteen. The competent age for Anglicans is usually ten to sixteen (but sometimes lower). The Presbyterians do not presently have a uniform term for what was originally called “the rite of full admission to full membership,” but the age is typically from ten to sixteen. The age of admission to the Lord’s Supper for Congregationalists is thirteen. The Mennonites baptize converts at around ten to twelve years of age in the United States (although they wait until fifteen to eighteen in most European countries, except in Holland where converts are baptized at age twenty). The Baptists baptize converts at any age, with the median age being ten to twelve, while about ten percent of those baptized are under eight. Interestingly, the typical age of converts being baptized in Baptist churches is getting younger, and the number of preschoolers being baptized continues to increase.²¹ This statistical information reflects the variety of ages at which churches consider children to be mature enough to participate fully in the church activities. Except for Baptists, none of the mainline denominations in the United States would consider a child under ten to be ready for full participation as a member. Although it may be true that this information for some denominations is different from the conversion experience of others, yet they share one common characteristic in that each rite marks the entrance into full participation in the life of the church. Furthermore, the ages are noteworthy in that they uniformly specify the minimum as

²¹Hugh Wamble, “Historic Practices Regarding Children,” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle, 71-83 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman, 1970), 75-83. Issues of *The Quarterly Review*, formerly an annual publication of the Southern Baptist Convention, reflected that this trend did not improve but actually worsened over the next twenty years.

being the older years of later childhood. It is also noteworthy that the ages vary from ten to sixteen, the latter year falling in the last half of adolescence (ages twelve to seventeen, or the end of high school).

How Do Cultural Differences Affect the Time of Conversion?

Since in some cultural settings a child may remain emotionally and intellectually dependent upon its parents for an extended period of time, cultural differences do affect the time of conversion. This dependence may delay the child's readiness for conversion because of its inability to think or choose for itself. The child may remain more childlike for an extended period of time. For example, in Sri Lanka, a male child typically is not allowed to leave his home without one or both parents accompanying him until the age of twelve. A female child would not go out alone until she reaches age sixteen. Such cultural differences will impact when a child is ready for the conversion experience.

Is It Really Wise to Talk about a Specific Age?

Since the Bible gives no guidelines, there is danger in trying to set a specific age for the time when a child is ready for the conversion experience. Some children may make a decision at a young age, while others may not be ready until they are older. However, Hendricks is willing to be more specific when he says that "it is highly doubtful that many children" will be ready for a conversion experience before age nine, although individuals do differ and God's Spirit works at His own discretion.²²

I offer a word of caution about expecting and seeking a conversion experience too soon. Many adolescents who were "converted" in their early years drop out of church and are very difficult to bring back into the church. It is possible that they have gained a false impression of what it means to be a Christian. They may think that they have already experienced all that Christianity has to offer them and that it had little or no value for them. Because of such

²²Hendricks, 95.

possibilities, it is spiritually harmful and, therefore, unadvisable to pressure a little child.

WHAT ARE THE AFFECTS OF AGE?

At the beginning of later childhood, six to eight years of age, a child is not likely to be aware that its sin is against God. Thus, it will feel little or no need to ask for God's forgiveness. Such a child is not ready for the conversion experience. Many nine-year-old children may also fit into this group. What can we expect of such a child? It can move beyond the desired early childhood commitment, which is to love Jesus. It may come to see Jesus is its friend and try to please Him by the way it acts. The child may even realize its need for God's help to do those things. Nevertheless, the child remains unready for conversion as long as it has an inadequate concept of sin. Although more mature eight and nine year olds will be in the process of developing the proper concept of sin (wrongs done against God) and that God can and will forgive if the child asks for forgiveness, many will not yet grasp this vital truth. As this concept is understood and personalized, the child begins to understand its need for personal repentance and forgiveness to be right with God. Once this concept is fully developed, the child is then ready to be confronted by the Holy Spirit in a potential conversion encounter. However, a child in the early years of later childhood who is capable of having such a conversion encounter with the Holy Spirit is still the exception, not the rule, and would need to have developed abilities that are exceptional for its age and beyond those of its playmates. Although such development may be possible, it is not likely.

When the child reaches ten to twelve years of age, it should be able to understand that its sins are basically against God, that Jesus died on the cross because of those sins, and that it needs forgiveness for those sins. The child should also be able to understand that, through trusting in Jesus as its personal Savior, it will become a child of God and receive new life. Thus, age nine or ten is a pivotal time when the child's thinking processes are beginning to develop sufficiently to understand the truths essential to having a conversion experience. It is generally around age ten when some children begin to develop abstract thinking, a process of thought which most religious educators and children's workers believe to be essential to the salvation process. Parents and teachers must be sensitive to the child's changing understanding of God and its sense of personal guilt because of sin.

Goldman indicates that “the years roughly from eleven to thirteen are good ‘teaching’ years, when pupils are more willing to learn, eager to please and have better relationships with teachers than in later secondary schooling.”²³ These years are apparently the optimum years for bringing a child to a saving faith in Christ. Once they pass, the child becomes more independent of adults and is affected more and more by other influences.

Again, it is important to remember that the ages I have suggested may differ from child to child, from denomination to denomination, and from culture to culture.

HOW DOES CONVERSION OCCUR?

Adults should not expect a child to be ready for the conversion experience in early childhood. Such thinking is to expect the unexpected. Parents and teachers would be wise to invest their time spent with the child in more profitable ways than in trying to seek its conversion to Jesus Christ. Should a parent worry about whether a preschool child is “saved” or “lost”? Should a Bible teacher present the plan of salvation to learners in early childhood classes? Should preachers try to win these little children to the Lord? The answer to each of these questions is the same: “Of course not!” Then, what should adults do to prepare the child for a future commitment?

How Can We Prepare for Future Commitment?

Early childhood is the “time to lay foundations for the child's spiritual development. Our goal should be to prepare the child for a later personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior.”²⁴ The writer continues, “When the Lord is ready, he will call the person to himself, using the foundations of attitudes and knowledge which parents and teachers have helped to lay.”²⁵ What would be appropriate for parents and teachers to do in order to lay the proper foundation? Clifford Ingle says that “content and religious practices belong to a later period” and

²³Goldman, 155.

²⁴Cos H. Davis, Jr., “How a Preschooler Learns about God” (Nashville, Tennessee: Preschool Program Section, The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1985), 6.

²⁵Ibid.

that “it may not be vital that little children be *taught* the doctrines of the faith” during early childhood since “they can understand very little anyway.”²⁶ Davis indicated that teaching a child to say “I love Jesus” or sing “Jesus Loves Me” is appropriate and desirable for this age.²⁷ Ingle believes that parents and Christian workers should not attach too much significance to such statements but, rather, that they should accept them as signs of spiritual growth and development.²⁸ Nevertheless, I believe that such signs are important developmental steps in and of themselves and that, when a child says with a joyful smile or sings with a heartfelt zeal, “I love Jesus,” it should be a time of rejoicing for both parents and teachers. It certainly is exactly that for the child. Parents and teachers will also be involved in teaching many other great biblical stories and truths during these foundational years.

HOW CAN WE LAY A GOOD FOUNDATION IN THE HOME?

There are five things that a family can do in the home to lay a good foundation for a child’s future:

1. “Teach a child how he should live, and he will remember it all his life” (Prov 22:6, GNB). A child learns from your actions (what you live) more than from your words (what you preach).
2. Provide a climate of warmth, considering its effects on the physical, social, emotional, mental, moral, and spiritual development of each child.
3. Investigate caregivers before you trust your child to their care and influence. Will they strengthen and enrich your child’s life?
4. Be an example of the love which you want your child to have and to give. Show love in tangible ways--through eye contact, listening, pleasant facial expressions, noticing what the child does, and giving abundant affection (hugs, pats, kisses).

²⁶Clifford Ingle, “The Child and the Home,” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle, 112-26 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman, 1970), 123.

²⁷Cos H. Davis, Jr., *Children and the Christian Faith* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman, 1979), 67.

²⁸Clifford Ingle, “Moving in the Right Direction,” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle, 141-57 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman, 1970), 154.

5. Accept the feelings of siblings who compete, tease, and fight. Assure them that you love them but stop their destructive behavior.²⁹

Following these guidelines will help parents do a better job of parenting. Furthermore, the home should be “the center of worship” in the following ways: (1) “Create a religious (worshipful) atmosphere.” This worshipful atmosphere would be one of “awe and reverence for God,” something which occurs every day and has “a natural spontaneity of happiness and joy.” The use of “simple religious expressions, actions, and prayers” and “appropriate religious art and literature” would be helpful in creating the desired atmosphere. (2) “Worship opportunities are created as a natural part of living by such things as parents’ humming or singing hymns, saying bedtime prayers, having a time of family devotions with all members present, and the religious observance of specific events.” Worship opportunities occur when a child asks questions, and wise answers may help shape the child’s theology and attitudes for the rest of its life. (3) “The home as the center of worship should be bathed in a spirit of joy and happiness.” Such a spirit “can capture the open innocence, freshness, and vitality of children and turn them Godward.” (4) “The primary way in which the home may become a center of worship is through the living example of parents.”³⁰

HOW CAN WE INSTILL RIGHT ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS?

Since attitudes and beliefs are much more likely to be caught than taught, parents should remember that the child will learn what it sees and feels more than what it hears. Thus, parents must live consistent, exemplary lives before their child. Parents must not separate religion from life. Their faith-life should not be merely a Sunday experience; rather, it should be a part of every day of the week.

If religion is important in all areas of the parents’ lives, a child will naturally begin to think of religion as important to its own life. The child will ask all kinds of questions—particularly religious questions. Parents should understand that a child asks religious questions—even

²⁹C. Sybil Waldrop, *Understanding Today’s Preschoolers* (Nashville, Tennessee: Convention Press, 1982), 59.

³⁰Ingle, “The Child and the Home,” 124-25.

questions about baptism, the Lord's Supper (Communion), conversion—long before it is ready to make a commitment to Jesus Christ. Parents should see such questions as “teachable moments” for training the child's understanding of ideas and beliefs—especially as they relate to the development of faith. There will be many times of questioning; and parents must not allow these moments to be wasted by ignoring them, by saying the wrong things, or by misunderstanding what they mean. They should ask questions to get the child to think for itself and to avoid the child “learning” (actually, memorizing) and giving programmed answers. Parents should treat these questions with dignity and respect, even if they are amusing. The questions are important to the child, or it would not ask them. Improper reaction by the parents may cause the child to think its questions will not be taken seriously, or that such questions are not important—the wrong messages to send to the child. The child will not likely ask important questions again, and both the parents and child will be the losers.

In order for parents to respond appropriately to a child's questions, they must be able to interpret the meaning of those questions, or the reasons the child is asking them. Is the child asking for basic information? Did the child see a friend talk with a counselor at church and become curious as to what the friend did? Is the child “being pushed” by a teacher or friend to make a commitment before it is ready? Or is it possible that the child is seriously considering making a commitment to Jesus Christ? All of these possibilities (and many more) are reasons why parents must find out why the child is asking questions. Chamberlain points out several “signs” that a child may be under conviction: (1) Asking questions, (2) A change in the “usual level of activity,” (3) “Exaggerated fears,” and (4) “A more lively, even intense, interest in Bible study.”³¹ Not all of these signs may be present. They may also be present in different degrees in different individuals. Then, too, these signs may be simply a normal part of changing behavioral patterns because of growth and development. They may have nothing to do with interest in conversion. Parents must be flexible in interpreting such signs but sensitive when observing changes in a child's usual pattern of behavior.

Parents must be actively involved in this process of preparing and bringing their child to the point of being ready for the conversion

³¹Chamberlain, 50-52.

encounter. Once the child ceases being “safe” and becomes “lost,” the child is ready for a conversion experience. Thankfully, it is not the parents or teachers who determine this change in spiritual condition. It is the Holy Spirit’s responsibility to move the child from one to the other. It is, however, the responsibility of the parents and teachers to be alert so as to be more likely to sense the change when it occurs.

What Should We Do If the Child Has Doubts about a Previous Conversion Experience?

Although doubts usually occur in adolescence or adulthood, a child in the latter part of later childhood may have doubts about an earlier conversion experience. Doubts are not proof that a person needs to become a child of God; rather doubts reflect that the child is serious about its relationship with Jesus Christ. Parents should remind the child of its earlier conversion experience. They should ask it to remember and relive the experience in mind and heart. Parents should remind it that being a child of God is a result of faith and that feelings cannot be trusted. If those doubts persist, the parents should encourage the child to speak with a trained counselor, such as the pastor. There is always the possibility that the child did not have a genuine conversion experience and may need to do so. Parental conversations with the child’s Bible teacher may give additional insight into the child’s needs. Parents and teachers working together should be able to rebuild the child’s confidence in a previous conversion experience or, if necessary, to lead the child into a genuine conversion experience.

How Should We Counsel the Child about Conversion?

Once they have ascertained that the Holy Spirit is convicting the child of its need to have a conversion experience, what should the parents or teachers do? It is at this point that the child is ready to repent of its sin and to commit its life to Jesus Christ. Thus, the parents (or counselor) should include Bible verses about these facts: all are sinners (Romans 3:23), the penalty for sin (Romans 6:23), who can be saved and how (John 3:16), and prayer for forgiveness and for new life in Christ (Romans 10:9-10, 13). Parents and teachers should be comfortable using these and similar verses to guide the child through

the conversion experience. It is helpful to ask the child to describe in its own words (as opposed to church language) what it wants to do and why it wants to do it. The counselor must not ask “leading” questions that call for “yes-no” answers. Because a child might recognize the correct answers to these questions, the counselor must use a different type of question in order to find out the child’s specific, spiritual needs. The younger the child, the more critical this becomes.

It would be much more appropriate to ask questions that require a thoughtful response. Cos Davis writes,

Allowing the child to express his own thoughts and feelings has advantages. This helps you understand the level of his thinking, and it helps him clarify what he really does believe at this stage.

Questions or statements which provoke thought on the child’s part are most effective. For example, a question such as, Why do you think you need to become a Christian? can expose many of the child’s thoughts and feelings. Remember that questions with why, what, or how at the front of them are most likely to provoke the real reasons and ideas you need to hear.³²

After a conversion experience, whether at church, at home, or elsewhere, the child should receive appropriate counsel concerning the responsibilities of the Christian life. Parents, teachers, or some other church counselor (usually the pastor in smaller churches) may give such counseling. A child needs to understand that a new Christian is expected to be an active participant in the life of the church, to read the Bible and to pray daily, to grow spiritually. The parents are in the best position to insure that the child knows and understands these things and to encourage the child to do these things as a part of its spiritual pilgrimage.

Being aware of this information, parents and teachers are about as well prepared as they can be, in terms of knowledge. Parents and teachers can do their part in the conversion of a child by preparing the child through proper nurture. However, they must depend upon God for everything else, as the actual commitment, or lack thereof, is really in God’s hands and is His work to perform. The Holy Spirit knows how to

³²Cos H. Davis, Jr., *Children and the Christian Faith*, 66.

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bring about the right conditions in the child's mind and heart so that the child will give its life to Jesus Christ. We must trust the Holy Spirit to work to bring about the conversion experience at the right time and in the right place.