

## ENCOURAGING SPIRITUALITY IN CHILDHOOD

By Dr. Glenn A. Jent<sup>1</sup>

In Mark 10:16, we see a picture of Jesus taking little children (“babies” in the parallel account in Luke 18:15) up into His arms, placing His hands upon them, and blessing them. What a beautiful picture of the love our Savior has for little infants. Although His disciples seemed to see little value in parents bringing their children to Jesus, He certainly thought it was appropriate. The question we must ask is how and when we should bring our children to Jesus Christ. When can they have a genuine conversion experience? Then, once we have brought them into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, how can we encourage them in their spiritual growth?

First, I want to point out that I have written about the how and when to bring a child to Jesus Christ in a previous issue of this periodical.<sup>2</sup> Also, I have written a book that details the various levels of commitment possible throughout the lifespan.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, I will not speak to that idea in this article. Suffice it to say that I believe that *most* children are not capable of having what is sometimes called a conversion experience prior to nine or ten years of age because of the necessity of understanding many abstract concepts that are vital to the conversion experience. This in no way takes away from the fact that a type of spiritual growth is occurring as parents and teachers are laying the foundation for the child to have that salvation experience. However, spiritual growth at this time is related to the appropriate teaching of the Word of God and to human relationships that positively point the child to the importance of Jesus Christ in all of life. Such proper training prepares the child for the inner working of the Holy Spirit on the teaching that the child has received. These things obviously go hand in hand in preparing the child for the day of conversion, or reconciliation to God through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>2</sup>See “When Can a Person, Especially a Child, Have a Genuine Conversion Experience?” in *Torch Trinity Journal* 2, no. 1 (November 1999): 59-78.

<sup>3</sup>See *Spiritual Formation: A How-To Book for Parents and Teachers* (Bangalore, India: Theological Book Trust, 1999).

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Second, I want to spend the rest of the time spelling out how we as more mature Christians can encourage the spiritual growth of our children, especially once they have become a personal believer in Jesus Christ.

### **THE NATURE OF CHILDREN**

Children are naturally open to the teachings of the Bible. They love to listen to the stories from the Bible. Particularly, they love to hear about Jesus and His love for them. Although the Bible is written for adults with adult-level understanding, there is much within it that is useful for the instruction of children. We should not forget, however, that a child's understanding is on a child's level, even if using adult vocabulary. Of course, we want our children to move beyond a simple knowledge of the facts of the biblical stories. We want to foster understanding that leads to actual implementation of those teachings they have heard. Our goal is that the children will be able to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what we are teaching them. These activities are not possible for children until they have developed abstract thinking, which usually *begins* around age ten. Until they are able to do this, much of our teaching will remain at the knowledge/memorization of facts level, although we hope for some comprehension. The actual application of the biblical lessons may occur incidentally. However, it is not likely to occur as a direct result of genuine understanding of the spiritual significance of those teachings for the life of the individual. In the light of the limitations that children have in their understanding, we must be careful to choose biblical lessons and materials that are age-appropriate and developmentally sound.

The goal of our teaching must always be to foster spiritual development within the learner, regardless of age. This is particularly true for children, as their spiritual growth can be dramatic in a short period of time. In Luke 2:52, we read that Jesus, at age twelve, was growing in wisdom and stature, in favor with God (no doubt, through obedience), and in favor with man (no doubt, through lifestyle). It must be noted that spiritual growth often occurs in spurts, as opposed to steady, continuous (or uninterrupted) growth. The place where this growth is most likely to occur and to receive encouragement is in the home. However, when the parents are not spiritually responsible, the children may suffer a lack of normal spiritual development.

Unfortunately, spiritual growth “is not as predictable or assured as other types of growth in children. The neglect or ignorance of the principles of spiritual growth may explain why some people are chronologically mature but are still in their spiritual infancy.”<sup>4</sup> What a tragedy when parents fail to meet their most important responsibility to train up their children in the way of Jesus Christ!

Parents, especially Christian parents, have a responsibility to encourage the spiritual growth of their children. To fail to meet this important responsibility is clearly unthinkable to right-thinking Christian people. Thus, the vital issue before us is how parents can best meet their responsibility.

### **PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY**

The Bible is fairly specific in describing parental responsibility for teaching spiritual matters to their children. In Deuteronomy 6, God instructs Moses as to how to teach the importance of spiritual truth to the children: “Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (6:7-9). These verses indicate clearly that parents are to make discussion of the Scriptures an integral part of all of life, whether in the home or outside of the home. The entire chapter explains the importance of modeling obedience to the Almighty God before the children. The implication is that it does little good to teach if we do not live what we teach. Children need to see parents living out the faith, even in difficult circumstances, so that they understand that faith is not only for the good times, but also for the bad ones. Also, verse 20 reminds parents that they must be ready to answer children’s spiritual questions whenever they arise, not just when it is a convenient time for teaching. This parental responsibility is not just a woman’s responsibility. It is also a man’s responsibility, quite naturally since he is supposed to be the spiritual leader of the home (see Ephesians 5:22-33). The last verse of the Old Testament indicates that one of the roles of the prophet is to “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and

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<sup>4</sup>Cos H. Davis, Jr., *Children and the Christian Faith* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1979), 13-14.

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the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:6). Fathers may not escape parental responsibility without paying a great price: the lack of a relationship with their children.

Since we know that parents are responsible for teaching the Word of God to their children, how can they faithfully fulfill this responsibility? What all is involved? Parents must teach things that are related to salvation—e.g., the nature of God, the nature of man, the work of Christ on the cross, the need for repentance and faith. They must teach things related to prayer and Bible study. They must teach all of these things in relationship to natural spiritual growth—i.e., to become more like Jesus. They should also teach things related to the church—e.g., the history and life of the church, the value and importance of the church, the ordinances of the church—i.e., baptism and the Lord’s Supper (or communion)—and their meaning. Nothing related to the Christian life should be omitted. All of these things need to be taught and, most of all, modeled. In so doing, parents are encouraging the spiritual development of their children. They are laying a good foundation for a conversion experience for the younger children. For those children who have already had the conversion experience, they are building upon that foundation by encouraging them to develop a good relationship with Jesus Christ. Again, the most important factor is that the parents be good models of what they are trying to teach.

Of course, the parents can only do so much. The rest of the work is dependent upon the Holy Spirit. “In the same way that the Holy Spirit works through adults, He also works through children. And it is up to us, the older brothers and sisters in Christ, to uncover, encourage, and cooperate with the power of the Holy Spirit ministering in and through children.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, parents need to be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit in order to help children develop spiritually. It is also vitally important that they work to keep an open line of communication with their children so that they will feel comfortable in asking about matters related to spiritual growth, as well as other growth-related issues. This relationship of trust should be built and nourished from infancy on through adolescence by meeting their basic needs.

We continue to work with the Holy Spirit by setting a good example for our children. We do so by providing a Christian heritage in

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<sup>5</sup>Olive J. Alexander, *Developing Spiritually Sensitive Children* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1980), 20.

the home: through Bible study, praying, singing Christian music, sharing our lives in Christ together, and working with others. We do so outside of the home by attending church faithfully, giving, praying, praising, fellowshiping with God and other Christians, and by doing Christian acts of kindness. The example we set for our children must reflect a strong, maturing faith, one that is healthy and exercised daily. Because parents cannot expect their children to be more spiritual than they are, they should be making every effort to be growing spiritually. “It is not enough to tell them scriptural principles; we must live them out with them, helping them to apply truth to their circumstances. This involves time. There is no substitute for time spent with our children, talking with them, listening to them, working and playing together.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, such things as being polite, being patient, keeping promises, and showing respect are just as important in our relationships with our children as they are in our relationships with others. We need to encourage our children by praising them, a simple action which builds up their self-image. We need to help them discover their skills, the special abilities that God has given them, and encourage them to develop those skills.

## **PARENTAL TRAINING OF THE CHILDREN**

In Proverbs 22:6, the Scriptures relate that parents are to “train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” I want to call attention to the word “he.” By that, I want to focus on the fact that each child has a way that is according to God’s plan for his or her life. Parents are not to teach the child to go the way parents want (or think) the child should go, but the way God leads. Since we believe that God has a plan for everyone’s life, we should pay attention to what this verse is saying. Because of this verse, many parents assume that their children will be faithful to Jesus Christ throughout their lifetime; but, where there is no diligent, consistent training in the home, the Scripture promises no such thing. Thus, this proverb is speaking of the responsibility of the parents, not of the children. The promise is, however, that parents who fulfill their responsibility have higher expectations for their children than those who do not.

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<sup>6</sup>Tbid., 59.

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There are several areas of training that are essential to spiritual growth. Let us consider some of them at this time.

### **Conception of God**

One of the most important areas in need of parental guidance is in the area of understanding who God is and what He is like. Children's conceptions of God are typically inadequate; they often have distorted views of what God is like. Such distortions may actually inhibit proper spiritual growth because of a misunderstanding of God's true nature. "God's intention was that from birth the faithful, loving care of parents would provide experiences out of which the child could construct a clear, health-giving image of God. Even in our fallen world where God's good plan is marred, God can graciously work in the natural processes of living to draw the child toward an unfolding understanding and experience of God."<sup>7</sup> Because parents are responsible for helping the child have a proper conception of God, they need to listen carefully to children's views of God so that they may clarify and correct any distortion. Parents need to make certain that their children realize that their conception of God will undergo changes as they grow and experience God in their personal lives. Catherine Stonehouse states that "it is impossible to give persons an image of God in childhood that will be adequate for a lifetime" and that the child's relationship with God "must continually be transformed."<sup>8</sup> The fact that children's conceptions of God are continually changing does not lessen the importance of those conceptions. Their conceptions will influence their lives, their spiritual development, and their values.

### **Development of Values**

Cos Davis, Jr., describes values as "attitudes about the importance of certain things in life," and he suggests that parents should "guide their children to place great importance upon that which is most worthy and less value on those things which are less important."<sup>9</sup> Children that have been taught to value Jesus Christ are

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<sup>7</sup>Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: A BridgePoint Book of Baker Books, 1998), 137.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>9</sup>Davis, 44-45.

much more likely to commit their lives to Him than those who have not been taught such valuing. Davis points out three major sources that influence the development of values: family, religion, and society. He believes that “the family relationship, more than any other, is the basic influence on the value development of children. For good or bad children learn their basic attitudes and develop a system for judging the worth of people and things from the family.”<sup>10</sup> It is in the home environment that children most learn to love or hate. However, the home and church should be working together to teach proper values to the children so that they will love God, self, and others. Both the home and the church must work together diligently to offset the potentially negative influence of society. Society influences the values of children through such means as television, computers, popular literature, public school teachers, peer groups. These various types of influences affect not only values but also moral development.

### **Moral Development**

Julie Gorman defines morality as “more than rules”; rather, it is a “relationship” with Jesus Christ. This relationship is dependent upon the working of the Holy Spirit who “gives inner impetus to right doing and right thinking.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, parents should understand that non-Christian children should not be expected to act as those who are Christians because of the unique role of the Holy Spirit in giving guidance. Gorman writes, “Teaching them to be Christians’ is impossible without their first having experienced the radical transformation of the Spirit of God.”<sup>12</sup> That does not mean, however, that we should not try to teach them right and wrong. Parents and Bible teachers must teach children about godly living in order that they may develop wisdom and moral stature. Children also need to have opportunities to practice making good decisions—ones they are capable of making. Early decision-making should be based upon choices between good and good, not good and evil. As children progress, they need to be taught good and evil from the biblical perspective (since the

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>11</sup>Julie A. Gorman, “Children and Developmentalism,” in *Nurture That Is Christian: Developmental Perspectives and Christian Education*, ed. James C. Wilhoit and John M. Dettoni, 141-57 (Wheaton, Illinois: A BridgePoint Book of Victor Books, 1995), 154.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

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Bible is one of the primary sources for judging good and evil); and they should be given choices in which failure to choose to do good does not necessarily mean making an evil choice. Then, as children become more mature in moral decision-making, they need to face choices in which the wrong choice is actually negative (and/or wrong).<sup>13</sup> In following this prescription for development of moral decision-making, children are more likely to learn how to make good decisions.

In spite of appropriate training, children may still choose to do wrong. “Being able to *reason* ‘correctly’ does not mean that the child will choose to *behave* differently.”<sup>14</sup> Children who make wrong choices should receive proper correction and instruction to enable them to understand the impropriety of their choices and how to make the right decision in successive attempts. Parental over-reaction to wrong choices can make children have an inordinate sense of guilt. Proper parental teaching encourages children to acknowledge wrong choices and even to repent when the choice is against the teachings of the Bible—thus removing any sense of guilt. When the children know what the correct choice is and choose to do otherwise, parents must lovingly administer “strong, sturdy discipline including withdrawal of privileges and appropriate corporal punishment, where age and circumstance allow.”<sup>15</sup> Parents must not give up but, rather, continue to teach, train, and discipline (disciple) their children “according to their disposition” and their “God-given personalities.”<sup>16</sup>

I need to insert a negative thought at this point. Some parents, yes, even Christian ones, are not good at parenting and may actually negatively impact their children’s moral development and moral choices.

### **Poor Parental Modeling**

Unfortunately, some parents simply are not positive role models for their children. Some parents may be guilty of creating bad circumstances in which their children are provoked to act rebelliously or to do wrong. They may ignore their children’s need for attention and

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<sup>13</sup>Alexander, 91-93.

<sup>14</sup>Gorman, 154.

<sup>15</sup>Tom Bisset, *Why Christian Kids Leave the Faith* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1992; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Discovery House Publishers, 1997), 130.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 135.

cause them to act irrationally to get the needed attention. Also, parents may be guilty of making poor choices themselves. Under such circumstances, the children act improperly because of parental indecision or indiscretion. The obvious point here is that parents need to live the right kind of lives before their children and show them how to make proper decisions. Then, too, parents need to be sensitive to the needs of their children, not just aware of their own struggles and needs. Both Eli and Samuel (in the Bible) may have been fathers who were unaware of the needs of their children.

Some parents are negative, fearful, or restrictive parents; and they may actually hinder their children because they do not see opportunities for their children to grow and develop, whether the opportunities are physical or spiritual. Whereas they should be encouraging their children in certain circumstances, they may be doing just the opposite by discouraging them with words of caution or negative thinking.

On the other hand, some parents are too involved in the lives of their children. Such parents tend to lose their objectivity. They encourage their children to do some things that they are not physically or spiritually ready to do. They want their children to be “perfect.” However, no child will be perfect! Parents must not expect, or demand, the impossible from their children. “Our children are going to have moments when it seems they haven’t learned a thing . . . . At times, they are going to be difficult, disobedient, and disgusting. That’s part of the growing-up process. To expect perfection is to stir up needless fear and guilt in parents and unnecessary anxiety and resistance in children.”<sup>17</sup> Parents need to have realistic expectations in their dealings with their children. Otherwise, their children will grow up to have many different types of problems that will serve as barriers to their spiritual growth.

One teacher offered this assessment of the problem: “After forty years of teaching, I have concluded that my students’ feelings of insecurity, their lack of self-confidence, their feelings of inadequacy, or their low self-esteem are the biggest obstacles to my effectiveness as a teacher.”<sup>18</sup> It appears that some of the biggest problems that students in

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 144.

<sup>18</sup>Cliff Schimmels, *Teaching That Works: Strategies from Scripture for Classrooms Today* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing, 1999), 41.

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higher education face today are related to struggles that may be the results of poor parenting.

In the light of the negative impact of poor parenting, it is obvious why good parenting and good parental example are essential to the healthy spiritual development of children. Nevertheless, some of the children who have been reared in homes where they received poor parenting will find their way to our church Bible classes.

### **RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH**

When children come to the church and sit in the Bible classes, they bring all kinds of baggage with them from their lives at home and school. Some of them are complacent. Some of them are compliant. Some of them are unruly and rebellious. How welcome do we make them feel? Do we show them love and compassion? Do we show them the mind of Christ? Or do we make them feel uncomfortable and unwanted? We need to remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:5-6. He gives a word of encouragement and a word of warning: “And whoever welcomes a child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” In the light of these words of our Lord, we need to treat each child with unconditional love. We need to care for each one as if he or she were Jesus Himself.

I cannot stress enough the importance of teachers (as well as other Christian adults) being the right kinds of examples. Children are more moved by example than by the content of the teaching. That does not mean, however, that Bible teaching is unimportant. Bible teachers need to work diligently to encourage the development of the spiritual lives of their learners. Teachers should heed the following advice when teaching children, especially those children who do not have abstract capability or are just developing it:

In teaching children, it is important to begin with a concrete situation or happening from their lives that poses a dilemma. This is spoken to by concrete content from the Scriptures (this is why stories are good for children’s learning—they portray concrete happenings). While summarized in a generalization

memory verse, we must always bring that concept back to concrete, relevant happenings in the child's life.<sup>19</sup>

Such teaching allows children to grasp what otherwise may be beyond their mental capacity to understand. Children do not have adequate experiences to draw from as adults do, but this kind of teaching creates an experiential base upon which to build spiritual truth.

Interestingly, Gorman comments negatively concerning a popular form of teaching children. She says that "object lessons" may hold the interest of the learners because of the visual stimulation or because of some magical quality, but that they are more concerned with the how than with the moral principle being taught. Such teaching fails to "carry-over into life, and no transformation of life occurs."<sup>20</sup> Rather than using this kind of approach that is largely unsuccessful in producing learning, Gorman recommends the following: "'Hands-on' experiences, concrete objects, and activities are vital when teaching concepts of spiritual truth. Pictures, drawings, clay, models, investigations, and drama help reshape and build new ways of understanding."<sup>21</sup> The younger the children, the greater the need to use these kinds of teaching approaches.

In spite of all of the available literature, in spite of all of the available teaching aids, in spite of all of the available books on teaching, in spite of all of the teaching methods employed, the children "learn most of what it is that shapes their character from watching it lived before them."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, as with parents, the most effective teachers are those who live what they teach. The children see the importance of what the teachers are saying because they are consistently practicing what they teach. Such teachers can feel confident when they emphasize to the children that they also should live lives that are consistent with their love for Jesus Christ.

## CONCLUSION

Christians should live the Christian life, whether they are adults or children. God expects His people to live according to the teachings

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<sup>19</sup>Gorman, 147.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>22</sup>Schimmels, 64-65.

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in His holy Word. There are no exceptions, including the age of the believer. The wonderful reality is that, if children will live according to the Word of God, they can escape many of the heartaches and physical afflictions that result from sinful living.

Parents and teachers should expect the children to live the Christian life, while at the same time remembering that no one is perfect. They can and should encourage the children to make good decisions in choosing to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Although parents and teachers should work together to help children to grow spiritually, the parents must realize that they are the most important single influence in the lives of their children. Nevertheless, when parents and teachers work together as a team, they multiply the likelihood of the children becoming all that God intends for them to be. It is also possible that parents may see in the teacher one who can show them how to be better parents. It may also work the other way as well, as some parents may have better skills in relating to children than the teacher. If the former is the case, the teacher may recommend to the church leaders that they develop and offer a training program for parents. If a training program does not seem appropriate, perhaps the church leaders could form a support group for parents who are struggling and in need of learning parental skills.

Here in Korea, many young parents have their own parents living in the home and can learn from them. That will be beneficial to the extent that the parents are Christians who have excellent parenting skills. If not, that situation may actually compound the problem for young parents who seek to be good Christian parents by encouraging and training their children to grow toward spiritual maturity. One thing is certain: God has given children to their parents and has commissioned them with the responsibility to “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Parents who fail in this task will find no satisfaction or joy or relief in their old age.