

A Theology of Children and the Church¹

⁵*He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children,
⁶that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
⁷so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
⁸and that they should not be like their fathers,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.*
(Psalm 78:5-8)

The Value of Children

1. We believe that Children are a gift from God (Psalm 127:3). While having children creates new responsibilities in the lives of parents, children should not be seen as a burden but a blessing.
2. We believe that human life, from its earliest pre-born form in the womb until death, is the unique work of God and bears His image (Genesis 1:27; James 3:9).
3. We believe that children have tremendous value even before they are born because they have been intricately made by the hand of God (Psalm 139:13; Job 31:15). Therefore, we believe that abortion on demand reflects the devaluing of human life, and is an assault on the image of God.
4. We believe children are to be valued as much as any other age group. Jesus taught us about the inherent value of children when He rebuked the disciples for trying to prevent the children from coming to Him (Mark 10:13-16).

The Nature of Children

1. Children have a sinful nature
 - a. Despite being created in the image of God, all persons come into the world with a corrupt, sinful nature inherited from Adam (Romans 5:12-19).
 - b. We were all by nature born as children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3) and left to our own devices would be headed for certain destruction and eternal separation from God.

¹ This document has been condensed and adapted from *A Vision for Child and Youth Development* prepared by the elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN.

- c. Nevertheless, God in His infinite mercy has provided a way of salvation and offered new birth to all who will trust in Christ's sacrifice on their behalf (Ephesians 2:5-10; John 3:3-8; Hebrews 10:14).
- d. Therefore we believe in the power of God to change children so they become vessels for His use even while they are still children.

2. Children are immature

- a. In addition to sharing the fallen, sinful nature that all humans have, children are also less developed in their physical, intellectual and emotional capacities than adults are (Ephesians 4:14; 1 Corinthians 13:11; 14:20; Hebrews 5:12-13).
- b. Children, therefore, are in the formative stages of learning to think and reason and make moral judgments about what is good and bad, true and false, wise and foolish etc. They are easily swayed by cunning and deceit.
- c. Children are not to be criticized for their immaturity, but rather lovingly and patiently nurtured toward maturity.

3. Children become accountable

- a. All children are on a continuum from total helplessness to mature adulthood.
- b. Therefore, children gradually become more and more accountable for believing what is true and doing what is right. This is because accountability to know and believe and act assumes a certain level of natural ability. There is a time in the earliest years, for example, that a child would not be held accountable for failure to know and understand God as he is revealed in nature. When the Apostle Paul makes plain in Romans 1:18ff that we are all without excuse because God has made Himself known through "what has been made" (v. 20) there is an assumption that those who are without excuse have the significant cognitive ability to relate what they see in nature to God.
- c. We are distinguishing natural ability from moral ability. None of us as fallen sinners, dead in our trespasses, was morally able to believe and obey God. We loved sin too much to come to the light (John 3:19-20). We could not because we would not. Our will was so enslaved to sin (Romans 6:20) that it was morally unable to submit to God (Romans 8:7). So even though we were morally unable to do the right, we were held accountable to do it, because accountability assumes natural (or physical) ability, not moral ability.
- d. Natural ability means having the basic physical prerequisites for knowing what is true and right. It includes having a mind that is physically developed enough to perceive the world and process moral thoughts. This means that there are increasing stages of

moral accountability in a child's life. A one-year-old can be taught not to touch the electric socket and can be held accountable for simple levels of obedience. But a one-year-old is not accountable to understand and believe the gospel. He does not have the mental capacities or the powers of perception to grasp the meaning of sin and redemption.

- e. Thus, we believe there is an “age of accountability” when a child is morally responsible to put his faith in Jesus. Jesus said that the “little ones” believed in Him such that they served as an example to the disciples (Matthew 18:3-6). No one but God knows the exact moment when a child reaches such an age. Nor is it crucial to know when a child comes to the age of accountability, if efforts are being made all along the way to present Christ in the fullest, most loving and truthful way so that children may believe as best they can at every level of development. God will determine when a simple acquiescence to parental teaching becomes personal, authentic faith.

The Responsibility of Parents Toward Their Children

1. Responsibility to teach and model God’s truth
 - a. The Bible consistently and explicitly lays upon parents the primary responsibility for teaching and modeling God's truths to children. It is crucial that there be a clear understanding of the primary role parents have in the training of children, so that the biblical responsibility given to parents is not ignored and laid on the church.
 - b. The clearest Old Testament passage that instructs parents in this regard is found in Deuteronomy 6:5-9. This passage instructs parents to take great care to carefully teach their children the truths from God’s Word. These teaching times are to be done both formally and informally – both by our words and by the example of our daily lives.
 - c. In a similar way, the New Testament instructs fathers to lovingly and gently bring their children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).
 - d. While the apostle Paul singles out fathers in this passage, it is clear from Scripture that both fathers and mothers are to be involved in nurturing faith in their children (Proverbs 1:8; 31:1).
2. Responsibility to discipline
 - a. Parents have a God-given responsibility and authority to discipline their children in the Lord (Proverbs 22:15; 29:1).
 - b. Discipline is not optional for Christian parents, and the Bible contains many examples of what happens when parents fail to exercise discipline in the home (1 Kings 1:6)

- c. This discipline is to be rooted in love (Proverbs 13:24; 19:18), patterned after God's discipline of us (Hebrews 12:5-11), and not done in an overbearing manner (Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21).

Implications for the Family's Relationship to the Church

1. Parents should view children's ministry as something to supplement, strengthen, and reinforce what they are teaching and modeling at home, not as a substitute for it. Despite wonderful programs and opportunities provided by our children's ministries, we believe parents exert the most significant influence on their children.
2. Given what we have said above about discipline, it follows that children should be taught to pay attention and not to unduly disrupt worship services, weekend classes, or any other church function. This will mean that parents also will be teaching their children to respect other authorities in their lives.
3. At Crossridge Church, we believe children absorb much from attending worship services with their parents. Children who are encouraged to participate by singing and listening will more often place value in corporate worship.

Implications for the Church's Relationship to the Family

1. Since it is primarily the parent's responsibility to teach their children the ways of God, children's ministries are provided to assist parents in that role, not to take it from them. When children are entrusted into the care of the church, we will seek to provide faith-nurturing programs that will fit their needs and will support that home-based training.
2. At the same time, however, we must remember that we are the extended family of Jesus. As such, we must support and encourage each other, especially those who come from unbelieving families. We must endeavor to become for children and their families the extended Family of God where support, encouragement, teaching and training are a regular part of life.
3. Weekend classes for children are the church's primary vehicle for Biblical teaching. Other activities shall be encouraged to provide positive learning and ministry experiences that will complement the weekend experience and the teaching received at home.
4. Understanding that children are in a formative stage, it is essential that the church provide spiritual, emotional, and physical protection for children.

We have examined some fundamental truths about the value and nature of children and the primary responsibility upon parents to train and discipline children. From these, we conclude that Crossridge Church will be a powerful influence for the good of children if the church equips parents to savor a vision of God, to have God's truths in their hearts and on their lips, and to understand that they must pass these life-giving truths on to their children. If the church successfully empowers and assists parents in these responsibilities, then the

children in the church will be mightily blessed.

