

## Teaching children about God

*In this important article, Andrew and Christine Walker (Knowle and Dorridge, UK) show that teaching children about God is not only our highest aim as parents, but also one that affects every area of our interaction with them. It covers Bible reading, conversation, prayer and ecclesial activities—all of these, certainly—but the net must be cast wider than this. We teach children about God by our whole way of being in every aspect of living, and by trying to be ‘God-like’ in our own way of life. We must find that delicate balance between commanding obedience while at the same time allowing their free will to develop, so that, as adults, by God’s grace, they may choose to serve Him for themselves.*

**W**HEN PARENTS brought their children to Jesus, he took the little ones in his arms and blessed them. “Let the children come to me”, he said; “do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Mk. 10:14).<sup>\*</sup> In that simple cameo we see the highest aim of any parent. We can labour to feed them, clothe them, educate them, teach them to be polite and thoughtful, we can do all these; but above all our task is to teach them about God and His manifestation in His Son, to bring them to Jesus.

Easily said, but how? To teach them academically the Bible stories and why we believe them is relatively straightforward. We can read them stories, take them to Sunday School and CYC; we can read the Bible with them, play Bible games and talk about these things over meals. But it is possible to do all this and never touch their lives. What is it that will cause the Word of God to enter their hearts, to change them so that they not only know about God but love Him? What will make Jesus their friend for life?

There is, of course, no handle that we can turn that will automatically produce godly children. If that were the case there would have been no Cain or Ishmael, no Absalom or Manasseh. In the end it is a stronger arm than ours that, though we may run heedless in the slippery paths of youth, conveys us safe and leads us up to man. It is one of the great mysteries of the hand of God—and

sometimes one of the great sadnesses—that, despite the best endeavours of godly parents, children may choose a different path. But that is no reason not to do what is good, not to be the best influence that we can be. There is much that we can do, and the sooner we start the better.

### When they are very young

When your young son or daughter is just beginning to talk, you may feel as parents that you want to sit down together with pencil and paper and map out how in the next eighteen or so years you are going to teach your precious child the things that you believe. And if you are disciplined enough there is even a possibility that

you may find time to do it.

Now, when they are very young, is a good time, maybe the only time, to start. It’s no good expecting your son suddenly to start reading his Bible when he is up to the eyeballs in homework, or asking your daughter to believe that a loving God created the world when she has already learned that ‘everything evolved from a primeval soup’.

However, it’s also the right time to realise that, however long your list and however well you stick to it, there will be no point if you don’t live it first. You wouldn’t succeed very well trying to get a child to be musical if you never sang, or to love the open air if you spent your all free time in an armchair.

This isn’t just about teaching by example. It’s not just about what you do, even what you say, but what you are. Children aren’t fooled if you just do something when they are watching. They need to feel that ‘this is what we do’ right from the start; that wanting to know about God is ‘normal’ and it’s fun. With every word you speak, with every action, you are teaching them something; teaching them about yourself and what you believe, showing them what is important to you; revealing your values. In the ultimate, you are teaching them about God. If you speak of

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<sup>\*</sup> Scripture quotations from the ESV.

someone having 'a good job' and mean that they earn a lot of money; if you refer to a 'lovely home' and mean that it is luxuriously furnished; or speak of a child 'doing well at school' and mean that they passed their exams; you are unwittingly teaching your children that your ideas of what is good or lovely or what is done well are no different from your neighbours'.

So with that in mind you can start your list.

### **Bible stories**

Reading anything with children is rewarding, and there are many very attractive Bible story books to include in the repertoire. Very young children find it difficult to distinguish between reality and imagination, but as soon as they understand what 'pretending' is you should make it clear that 'this story is in the Bible so it's true'.

And you can talk about what you've read. Whether or not it's a Bible story, you can comment that 'That wasn't a very kind thing to do, was it?', or if they are feeling frightened, 'Perhaps you can be brave like Daniel was'. But make sure it's still fun. You don't want to get so that every story session is a lecture. Playing Bible games, doing Bible jigsaws, singing Bible songs in the car, all give the same opportunities.

The early years of a child's life are the best opportunity you will have to impart what you want them to learn. You may get tired of their constant desire to be entertained by you, but it won't be long before they are off somewhere and you may be wishing you could talk to them. It is also important that it is you that is influencing them, not the television, or a child minder who may not share your values. It is sometimes a cause of contention whether or not both parents go out to work when children are in their formative years. Only you as parents know what is best for your family, but you ought to think carefully about the time you can spend with your children. When they are at home, they may be noisy, disruptive and untidy; but the silence when they have left is like a fading echo of missed opportunities.

### **Bible readings**

Little children love to do what adults do, and soon learn to sit with their 'own Bible' whilst their parents read, and this can develop into letting them read a verse or two as they become able to. You have to pace it as they get older. A teenager, for instance, will easily become resentful if you insist on three long chapters when they have a mound of homework to do, so use suitable Bible

versions, or perhaps, for a time, decide to read chapters that go with the Sunday School lesson so that it's relevant. Have a purpose in reading by suggesting you all decide as you read which is your favourite verse or you all think of a question to ask the other members of the family when you have finished reading. It's much better to read one chapter, or even half, and get something out of it than feel you have to plough through them all.

By the way you treat the Word of God you are showing them whether or not you truly believe it; not by what you say about it—that part is easy—but by the way you regard it. If you truly believe that it is the light that guides your life, that lifts you from despair, that illuminates your marriage and your family, then that faith will show in the way you live far more vividly than if you grind duteously but unwilling through the daily readings.

Your attitude to His Word betrays your attitude to God, and by observing you and listening to you your child will learn—or not—about God Himself. Through you a child should come to see that it is God's ways that matter; God to Whom we should listen; God Who, although He may be invisible, is directly relevant to our lives.

### **'Going to the meeting'**

Taking little children to the meeting is something that needs understanding from all concerned. Brothers and sisters who are not used to having little children around need to learn to realise that these little ones are our future and should be encouraged at all costs. On the other hand, parents shouldn't be afraid of expecting their children to be understanding of the older generation. There's no need to take noisy toys or rustling sweets, and if a piece of carpet stops the chairs making a noise or silences a falling pencil, take some. There are also times with some children when they really can't sit still and can't whisper, so it may be fair to all for a few months for the parents to take it in turns to 'enjoy' the speaker.

Much of the reason for children going to meetings is to make your life their life; for them to make friends there, young and old, and to establish a way of life they will want to adopt for themselves. If we run down the speaker or our brothers and sisters when we get home, or are seen by our children to be causing dissension in the meeting, they won't feel it is something they want to belong to. On the other hand, youngsters aren't stupid; so it may be sensible to be honest if a speaker 'had an off day' by admitting that it

was a bit boring but he was doing his best, and perhaps suggest they could have been thinking what they would have said.

Going to Sunday School, CYC, youth weekends and study days can all build up a way of life that we want for our children, so make up your mind early that that is what you want. You are committing yourself to hours of driving them around, weeks of waiting while they make up their minds which youth weekends they want to go to, and years of patience; but you will at least know where they are and who their friends are. At best they are learning what you want them to learn.

You might have to decide whether a youth weekend is more important than homework. Whilst it is good to encourage them to 'work as to the Lord', we should also get into perspective whether we would prefer, when they are grown up, that they have accepted God into their lives or that they have got a first class degree.

#### **Like a father**

Young children have a very innocent perception of God, and their initial concept of what God is like will relate to the things around them. The words of Scripture provide plenty of material to help in these early stages of our understanding; metaphors that we will never grow out of, and which sustain our faith throughout our lives. The Almighty is described as a shepherd, an eagle, a rock, a fortress; but though even these simple thoughts would tax the comprehension of a young child, there is one that will not. God is like a Father.

For many parents that will be the first answer to a child's naïve questions about God. What is He like? He is like a father: strong, caring, patient, loving, forgiving, there to pick you up when you fall. We have only to consider these parallels for a few seconds to catch our breath and realise the overwhelming implications. If a child thinks God is like a father, what is a father like? In particular, what about the man who sometimes comes home from work long-faced and short-tempered; the man who has no time to play football with his son; who is not interested in his daughter's dolls? What do we teach our children about God by who we are?

The parallel applies, of course, primarily to fathers, but mothers are not immune. "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you", God says through Isaiah (49:15).

So we reach the daunting realisation, not just that children learn about God from their parents, but that a child's concept of God will be based on his or her parents, and therefore, if a child is to learn to understand and to love God, the young man and woman who brought him into the world and who are taking their first faltering steps into parenthood should behave like God.

This is a daunting but wonderful truth. Parents who feel a desperate desire for their child's well-being, who grieve when he is bullied at school or she is lost in the park, who gain so much joy from the smallest achievement of their offspring, come to appreciate the parallels with our Father in heaven, Who taught Ephraim to walk, Who took them up by their arms, Who led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and Who bent down to them and fed them. It is through our children, above all the other experiences of life, that we come as adults to appreciate what God is like.

But what about our children? How do they, through us, come to understand what God is like?—their heavenly Father, to Whom, one day, they may become adopted as true sons and daughters.

God made us to be in His image; but for our children the Almighty will, in the early stages of their lives, be in the image of their parents. If they do not find in their human father and mother someone to whom they can turn, someone who will listen to them, someone to whom they can confess their sins and trust in their forgiveness, how can we hope that they will come to believe in the God Whom we profess has those qualities?

So, our parenthood must be based on the Fatherhood of God, from Whom every family in heaven and earth is named. The pattern He has set as a Father will define the way we should behave as parents, and the way we behave will largely determine their perception of God.

#### **Praying for them**

The guidance of Scripture, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6), is of course good when taken at face value, but the Hebrew word translated "train" has nothing in common with tying a rose to a trellis, or with using an exercise bicycle. It really means 'dedicate', 'offer to God', and that is something that, through our prayers, we can do. Sometimes the job before us can seem like a mountainous task, but we are not

on our own. God wants the best for our children as well as we do, so we can ask His help. We can start before they are born and continue for the rest of their lives. Just as Hannah brought Samuel to God and left the young child in His care, so—metaphorically—can we.

### **Praying with them**

Perhaps more with this than anything, you can't start too young. Children seem to be born with a reverence that should be nurtured rather than stifled. It's not long before they want to say prayers themselves, and by then they should have good examples at least of praying at meal times and bedtime. Somehow they should realise that as parents you also pray when you are on your own, and pray about everything, so it doesn't hurt to suggest it when there is a problem or something to be glad about.

But, once again, we should pray when we want to. It's right that we should still give thanks for our meals if there are school friends to tea. We can show our friends what we believe in this way, but if it's going to cause embarrassment at school we could perhaps leave it until our children are ready to cope with the situation themselves. They will come round to it if you are understanding.

Children's prayers bring their own complexities, of course—and difficulties. It is good for the child to learn to thank God for friends and family, to ask for help to cope with problems. But what about when he asks for his football team to win, or she prays that her pet gerbil will recover? Just as children would ask a human parent for whatever was on their mind, so a child should be able to ask God; but the child has to learn that, as with human parents, the Almighty will take His own decision, and the child needs to learn to accept His will.

Can a child confess his sins to God and ask for forgiveness? Without a doubt. True, it may be many years before they are able to reach a full understanding of the gospel and fully to find forgiveness in the waters of baptism; but baptism is about more than forgiveness, it is about a new relationship with God and the Lord Jesus. To teach children that their bad behaviour upsets their Maker without also permitting them to say 'sorry' is to burden them with a weight of guilt that they should not be expected to bear. Just as during his time on earth the Lord Jesus took children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them, so surely he still does.

### **Free will or predestination?**

It is hard for us to understand how it is that God at the same time acts as the potter who moulds his clay, while simultaneously giving us total freedom to decide our own course. With children the situation is much simpler. We may influence, guide, cajole, persuade—as many synonyms as we can think of—but when they grow up it is they who will decide.

What do we do while they are at home? Take every decision for them, press them hard into our own mould, in the hope that when they leave home the clay will have set? With some children it may work, but there is the greater danger that the pressure of years of resentment will cause them to rebel and cast off entirely their harsh constraints.

Or do we give them total freedom to decide everything for themselves? Clearly not. Childhood is not a time for taking big decisions, otherwise infants would be free to marry or buy a house.

Somewhere in between these extremes is a gentle balance; a widening path which, as they mature, allows them more freedom to take decisions for themselves.

So what about when they want to play football on a Sunday or go to a friend's house on CYC night? These situations cause parents hours of prayerful agonising, and of course the final decision will depend on the situation. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that children sometimes recognise for themselves what is right, and lack only the courage to tell their friends that 'I go to church on Sunday'. A firm 'no' may be what they secretly want to hear; it means that they can go back to their friends and say, 'I can't come—my mum won't let me'.

On the other hand, it is important to recognise that they have not yet taken the personal step of commitment that we trust will come one day. They are still learning, and their faith and trust in God are maturing qualities. Particularly as they get older, there is room for occasionally lengthening the rein and allowing them to take their own decisions about their activities and their use of time, so that they can learn for themselves.

### **Discipline**

Fortunately, in God we have the best example of how to discipline our children. This can be our guide to help us, but it is also a model for our children to learn about God. He doesn't let us have everything we want. He chastises us when

we need it and He forgives us endlessly. It is a daunting thought that we can be an example of God to our children, but there is no harm in telling them that is why we do what we do whilst admitting we are poor imitations.

A clear lesson for us to learn, of course, is that the Almighty tirelessly taught His people, "I have sent to you all My servants the prophets, sending them persistently" (Jer. 35:15), and that is where our emphasis should lie. Punishment may reinforce teaching, but it is no substitute, and, as in everything else, we are by our actions teaching our children, for good or ill, an understanding of God.

### Living

If we ask ourselves why we go to the meeting, read the Bible, etc., the answer should be that we want to. We want to find out more, to worship God, to thank Him and to be friends with people who think like we do. So the best thing we can do

for our children is to help them to feel like this as well. And the best way to do this is to live our faith. We can make the family strong and show our faith by making the time to eat together, to spend time with each other, show we love each other, talk together and to be honest with each other.

Unfortunately, there is no magic curriculum that will ensure children will turn out the way we want them to; but there are certainly things we can do that will help, and things that will put them off. Beyond that we can only pray for them, and make their acceptance of Christ an assumption rather than an aim.

God chose Abraham so that "he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has promised him" (Gen. 18:19). May we as parents accept the same calling, and in God's mercy receive the same blessing.

## Reading the Bible with children

*Many of the articles collected in this Special Issue emphasise the importance of regular Bible reading with children as part of the daily routine. Chris and Gill Tarry (The Hague, Netherlands) look back to the years when their children were small and explain in a very personal way how they introduced them to Bible reading. They outline a routine which worked for them and may help others also.*

*"Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD: and thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" (Deut. 6:4-7, RV).*

ONE OF THE greatest joys in life is giving birth to your own healthy child. What a wonderful gift from God! Suddenly all the verses in the Scripture about childbirth, the experiences of the parents of the Bible, particularly Mary at the birth of our Lord, all become doubly

and personally full of meaning. One even begins to understand the love of the Father for His own Son. Our initial excitement was enough to keep us awake all the first night while the baby slept happily on!

### Early years

In this early period, keeping the baby happy and our own routine on an even keel was enough to keep us busy. Our constant prayer for the child was that he would grow up to serve his Lord. By the time of the birth of our second child, two years later, the older one was already enjoying stories, and Bible stories<sup>1</sup> with a prayer were part of the bedtime routine. As the younger one grew, he

1. Attractive and well-illustrated Bible story books are produced by many publishers, but not all of them are as accurate as we would like. Books by trustworthy publishers are stocked at the Christadelphian Office. Lion is one of these and Walker Books another. Stories and tapes are produced by Candle. Christian Focus, Scripture Union, Peter Haddock, Frances Lincoln and Award are other publishers with books stocked by the Office. A list of the publications stocked by the Office for children can be found in the current price list.