

OUR COVENANT WITH KIDS

*Biblical Nurture in Home and Church*

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CHRISTIAN  
**FOCUS**

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To my parents

Who have blessed many children  
with the 'book' of their lives

## CHRISTIAN PARENTING IN A HOSTILE WORLD

*'Doctrine is the foundation of duty; if the theory is not correct, the practice cannot be right. Tell me what a man believes, and I will tell you what he will do.'* (Tryon Edwards).

Frankly, I am glad I am not a child. Oh, don't get me wrong; I enjoyed my childhood. I carry fond memories of carefree times, waking up with the feeling of freedom and anticipation as I knew play was my only agenda that day. I went to a public school where the Bible was taught and most of the children claimed to be Christians. By my teenage years, I was aware that some students were involved in drugs and sex, but these were the 'oddballs', a group apart from the mainstream of students who were basically moral. I enjoyed television, movies and music, but most of the entertainment was fairly innocent by today's standards. There seemed to be a conspiracy to promote good values wherever I looked, be it at home, school, church, or the media. Children were largely protected from the immoral trends that were building up momentum in the adult world.

Times have changed. As a Christian psychologist who interviews children and youths for a living, I am struck by the changes almost daily. For many children, getting an education at school

is a goal secondary to protecting themselves from violence. Being 'good' is something that will likely bring ridicule from peers who exert pressure toward experimentation with alcohol, drugs, sex, truancy and deceit. The media has found a wonderful market in children and teens, and exploits their sinful desires to sell products, cleverly managing to wrangle money from the hands of disapproving parents. Yet many parents are not so disapproving. These actually promote the cultural rejection of moral values or at least remain quiet on the issue in order to protect the self-esteem of their children from those who might harm it by correcting their behaviour. I am embarrassed to say that fellow psychologists are largely to blame for paralysing parents' moral impulses by (falsely) warning them that responding negatively to the behaviour of their children will strip them of good feelings about themselves.

These changes have not been lost on the followers of Christ. Christians have led the battle-cry against immoral cultural trends that threaten our children. We loudly protest against abortions that deprive children of the chance to live and grow. We discourage our offspring from listening to the cruder forms of contemporary music and try to replace it with Christian music that often sounds much the same. We preach abstinence until marriage and limit young children's exposure to the increasingly graphic sexuality beamed by television into our homes.

Christians have developed strong organizations, such as James Dobson's 'Focus on the Family', which are explicitly designed to promote what we often call 'family values'. As state-run schools have rendered God irrelevant to their agendas, believers have founded numerous Christian schools to ensure that their children see God as part of all of life. Some parents take matters more directly into their hands and school their children at home. Churches reach out to young people, offering entertaining activities to lure them off the streets and to give opportunity to speak to them of Christ. Children are given special attention in many church services through 'children's sermons' or are provided their own worship opportunity in a separate 'children's church' where the lesson is more on their level.

One of the major Christian strategies for combating the negative influences of our day is the written word. Books and magazines flood the market with advice for maintaining (or

regaining) control over children and pointing them to Christ. Concerned parents, anxious to protect their progeny, make many of these bestsellers. It would appear the person concerned about the children under his or her care has sufficient resources for the task. This brings us to a crucial question that must be answered before proceeding with the present contribution to the Christian parenting literature: Why do we need another book on the subject?

My answer is, for all our efforts to reach our children, we are failing. Children of Christian parents, according to many surveys, don't act very differently to those of unbelievers when it comes to many of the moral issues of our day. Many profess Christ, but only with a frail faith that is easily bullied by the influence of the world. The faith that we are passing on is not the hearty faith of the gospel that can stand against the evil forces of our day. Many of our children believe in God, but fail to see how all of life is to be lived to his glory. They take on the shallow view of Christianity that provides 'fire insurance' for the afterlife but is too weak to move them to serious commitment.

I believe I know why we are failing. Our feelings for our children appear to be intact, and our eagerness to reach them cannot be challenged. However, I fear in our zeal to protect them and keep them from evil we have misunderstood the threats to our children and have offered shallow solutions to very deep problems. We fret and fuss in concern, then grab 'how to' answers to the problems as we perceive them, only to find they are inadequate. We have misjudged the severity of the threat, and offered grossly inadequate responses as a result.

### **How firm is our foundation?**

A closer look at most Christian books on parenting will show a variety of theories on how to bring up children at the dawn of the new millennium. Many, frankly, are what I call 'baptized psychology'. The author takes a favourite psychological theory, searches the Scriptures for some verses to support it, and offers it to parents. Others are less well informed, being merely personal opinions dressed up with clever stories and an entertaining presentation to encourage parents, but fail to offer serious solutions. Some are more biblical, taking key references and

building practical suggestions from them. What is missing in all of this is an effort to examine all that the Bible says about children, place it into a comprehensive framework, and use this as a foundation upon which to build our ministry to children. It will take a full-orbed biblical worldview about children to equip us for victory. Sadly, this need comes at a time when many Christians don't like to think deeply about their faith in any area, shunning 'theology' or anything more demanding than simple, practical suggestions.

### **The frog in the kettle**

The neglect of well-reasoned, biblical thinking about children is rendered more scandalous given the major changes taking place behind the scenes in the world around us. While Christians are alert to obvious assaults on our beliefs, we blindly follow the culture in ways we do not realize. This is in part due to our accepting the contemporary stress on experience over absolute truth, with little consideration of the implications. Stimulation, not reflection, is valued, and we are easily caught up in this error. But to overlook such important changes in the 'philosophy' of the world is to enhance the risk of losing our children to it. Ignorance of these trends will expose us to the fate of the frog in the kettle whose demise was due to its lack of awareness of the slowly changing conditions of its environment. Christians easily miss several critical themes, and an awareness of these will help us grasp the importance of thinking more deeply about our ministry to children.

#### **THE LOSS OF TRUTH**

Throughout most of history, people believed in the idea of truth. Seeking truth was the motive for philosophy and science. This pursuit was driven by the belief that absolute truth existed and that anything short of that was insufficient. People believed that we would reach truth through the power of human reason that would develop great sciences and technology and so solve the world's problems. This experiment has failed. The products of man's reason have not led to truth. The same nuclear physics

that keeps people warm with electricity supplies the technology for weapons that can destroy entire populations. Education was to solve the problems of the human race as we believed greater knowledge (bringing us closer to 'truth') would eliminate the central problem of ignorance. Yet, crime and poverty increased none the less. The notion that sexually educating our children in schools would lead to a reduction of pregnancies and venereal diseases has proved to be grossly inaccurate.

Modern thinkers, distraught by the failure of the pursuit of truth, have given up the search, concluding that objective truth does not exist. Enter the postmodern ideas of making one's own truth and rewriting historical 'facts' to match current values. Since there is no truth, every idea has equal value and contradictions can be ignored. New age spirituality thus draws from various religious traditions to find experiences that the individual might seek, disrespecting the belief systems from which they originate.

Christians often fail to see that this is the backdrop of our modern disregard for doctrine. We say, 'Just give me Jesus', but avoid any doctrinal statements that might actually define who he is. We seek the benefits that the Christian faith might bring us, but refuse to see it as a system of doctrine, or truth.

An example of how relativism has impacted the followers of Christ can be seen in a recent survey of Americans where three quarters of the population denied believing in absolute truth. Amazingly, 62% of evangelical Christians agreed,<sup>1</sup> suggesting that the majority of people who believe in the Bible and in Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, do not believe in absolute truth! This strains our sense of logic. Yet, it can be explained by saying that, for some people, Jesus is the truth for them, but not the Truth in an absolute sense. The value of the Christian faith is, then, in its meaning for particular individuals. We downplay doctrine because it assumes a particular thing is true apart from our individual experience, and thus sets us in opposition to the thinking of the world.

This is seen in a larger scale in churches where programmes are designed to be 'seeker sensitive' by providing uplifting experiences and entertainment. Doctrinal issues again are avoided because they might discourage numerical growth, the primary goal of many churches. Unity is pursued at the price of

knowing what we believe, for taking stands on theological issues can divide. Our increased attendance is offered as proof of the correctness of this view.

There are three major problems with such indifference to doctrine. First, it is unbiblical. Paul, for example, is not the least bit hesitant to proclaim the doctrine that God revealed to him. One of God's primary purposes in giving us the Bible is to reveal his nature and ways to us. To ignore the doctrinal aspects of Scripture in order to avoid disagreement is to trivialize the wonderful gift of God's revelation.

Second, making God knowable only through individual experience apart from objective truth is to fall prey to the postmodern ways of thought that we have just discussed. While we might not make the connection, the Christian distaste for taking doctrinal stands flows from our falling for secular opinion that Truth is unknowable and unimportant relative to experience.

The third reason is the most relevant to our purposes. We lose our children to secular ways of life and thinking because we fail to teach them that there is absolute truth. The biblical revelation of God offers us the information we need to build a comprehensive worldview that organizes our thinking and behaviour. This comprehensiveness is what our children need if they are to see the fullness of God's greatness and to be strengthened against the tantalizing offers of the devil. Our failure to value and teach the full counsel of God is a central reason that our children are weak in the faith. We would do well to heed Paul's advice in Romans 12:2: 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.'

#### POSTMODERNISM AND THE LOSS OF HUMANNESS

A favourite target of Christian criticism is 'secular humanism'. This, as you know, is the view that humans are the ultimate value. It is a school of thought that formed a part of the Enlightenment thinking we described above, claiming that man, the apex of evolution, is able to solve all of his problems. Just as faith in the pursuit of knowledge has turned to despair, so has the newest view of humanity called postmodernism. Humans were dethroned from the centre of thought and there is now no centre

at all, each person creating his or her own. In this new way of thinking, humans are not special, but merely a species equal to all others. As Ingrid Newkirk, president of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, said, ‘A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy.’<sup>2</sup> It follows that people lament the suffering of animals as much as the moral ills of society. Sacrificing rats for medical research to prolong the lives of humans becomes unethical and a form of ‘species-ism’. On what basis dare we value human life more than other forms?

This view of the equal status of all species is a basis for the increased assault on the protected state of children. If we are not special, why protect our little ones? If personal gain is our greatest value, then why not tap the market inherent in children and youth? Once upon a time children were somewhat safe from commercialism. Now, cartoons are based on films that are promoted through fast-food establishments. The line between the entertainment and the products has blurred as media moguls exploit parental guilt and coax children to get their parents to buy them more ‘stuff’. This invasion of our families becomes even more blatant as children grow older. Commercial forces appeal to the rebellious and even angry side of teens to promote music and products that pull young people away from parents, all the while expecting the parents to supply the money to make it happen.

Children provide another focus for postmodern apathy for humans. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., notes, ‘The new anti-humanism is inevitably anti-child, assuming as it does that new human life is a problem, a drain on the earth and on the parents’ resources.’<sup>3</sup> Abortion is the proving ground for this view. Evangelical rhetoric again misses the point. The issue is not really that unborn children are alive, but that the choice of the individual is sovereign and that human life is disposable if it interferes with free choice. After all, abortion saves society from ‘unwanted children’ (a term that in itself shows the devaluing of human life) and the financial and emotional burden they impose.

So, when we see angry teenagers today, maybe we can understand them a bit better as they react against the implicit message many of them receive: they are not really valued. In contrast, Christians who understand this will be in a position to assert the biblical view of humans, and children in particular, which places

great value on life because humans are made in the image of God and children are to be seen as gifts from him.

#### CHILDREN AS ADULTS

We have already seen how children are not protected as they used to be, especially in the media. The world is energetically recruiting its next generation of consumers.

I sometimes try to imagine life in days gone by. Only a few generations back a home was a private island. Though people interacted with their immediate community, parents easily controlled the intrusion of foreign ideas. Even so, foreign ideas were few as church, school and the community generally shared the same values, especially in Christian nations. Not so today. Even as I write, the air I breathe is filled with radio and television waves, beaming messages into my home that are completely unfit for children and go against everything I, as a father, am trying to teach my offspring. These evils are only a flip of a switch or click of a computer mouse away. The people who control such powerful influences have little respect for the vulnerability of children, seeing them as 'adults' who can make up their own minds.

A similar assault on children is seen in the area of sexuality. Situation comedies on television, often marketed as family fare, carry strong sexual messages to children. Occasionally this is done in a self-justified air of encouraging the public debate. Children are not only unprotected, but are portrayed as instigators of disrespect. Rude remarks from little ones are guaranteed laughs. Teenage sexuality is even more overtly depicted in programmes targeted at adolescents. The child who has liberal access to television is in many ways no longer a child at all.

Violence is promoted as well. While cartoons have admittedly always had violence in them, recently this has become much more graphic. The cheering of violence offers a false sense of empowerment to many youngsters who huddle in their inner-city homes, seeking safety from the all-too-real danger in the streets outside. Recent news of teenagers going on shooting rampages in the USA underscores the fact that children are adults when it comes to knowing violence.

Modern culture also encourages children to stand up for themselves, assuming they are equipped to handle adult issues

and problems. Increasingly media depictions of children have them rebelling against parents who are portrayed as mentally dull and out of touch with the world. The immensely successful movie *Home Alone* and its sequels tapped into the fear of abandonment latent in the minds of many children, especially in a day when they may sense that their parents see them as inconveniences. The swash-buckling star of the show sends these children the message that children must, and can, fend for themselves against threatening adults. After all, you can't count on your parents to be there for you.

It is then clear that we are not bringing up children in a neutral environment, but one that sees our children as adults to be seduced into the ways of the world. We must be able to produce children who are not only able to stand against such forces, but to claim enemy territory for the cause of Christ. This cannot be accomplished with shallow thinking about their nature and nurture.

### **Fallout in the church**

Our challenge is great enough, but the intrusion of these trends into the church itself makes it even greater. As those around us forsake truth, we retreat from the historic faith of the church to offer a weak faith of warm fuzzies. We hear of the loss of humanness as we count the numbers of persons who come to our churches and the dollars they leave behind. Good music and entertaining preaching abound, but genuine caring for persons, much less children, is rare. We may not be as inclined to treat our children as adults, but our indifference to this subtle worldly trend to do so betrays the shallowness of our thinking.

### **Lessons from the past**

Our review of these contemporary trends shows that we have, indeed, underestimated the opposition, focusing our efforts for our children on the symptoms rather than on the deeper problems. We realize now that the historic Christian faith is not as 'at home' in the world as it may have been in days gone by. Truly biblical thinking goes contrary to the ways of the culture around us, and trying to make it fit isn't going to work. If we are to

pass the faith on to our children, we must face the fact that true Christianity has been disenfranchised from our communities. Those genuinely burdened for our children must stop trying to fit the culture and realize that we must rediscover the unique Christian way of thinking and living.

In John Sommerville's intriguing book on children in English Puritan life, he points out that social groups lacking a secure place in the social structure are the most likely to sense the importance of reaching their children. The Puritans were such a group, and responded vigorously. Sommerville explains:

Puritan books had to warn children against a society in which their brand of religion was unfashionable. By way of insuring commitment to the movement, puritan authors emphasized doctrinal purity and spiritual inner direction when they addressed young readers. In effect they offered children a base in religious authority from which to challenge a corrupt social authority.<sup>4</sup>

The Puritans saw themselves as a separate group, and possessed a well-defined theology to pass on. These are two advantages they have over many modern Christians. We must not simply react against aspects of culture we do not like, but reject it at its roots, replacing it with a more fully biblical worldview. We must, like the Puritans, have a thorough respect for our opposition, for the threats we face from our culture are greater than the ones they faced.

### **Serious times demand strong medicine: responding to the challenge**

Why do we need another book on Christian ministry to children? The first part of the answer is, as we saw, that we have underestimated the adversity we face in raising children for Christ. The second part of the answer is that we have thus responded with shallow, 'how to' approaches that fail to consider the full counsel of Scripture. It is the purpose of this book to examine the entire teaching of the Bible that relates to children, to systematize it, and use this foundation to develop strategies that more adequately enable us to minister effectively to our children.

Thinking deeply about children and doctrine reminds me of spinach pie. I have never eaten such, and frankly the thought isn't particularly appetizing to me. Some things just don't seem to fit together well. Spinach has its place. A necessary evil, a 'good-for-you' food that many of us simply tolerate because we know we should. A few special souls develop a genuine taste for it, and I commend them for achieving something I have not. Pie, on the other hand, is a more pleasant topic. Sweetness, warmth, delight—all seem to go with the thought of this wonderful dessert. Spinach and pie appear to lack anything in common other than being edible, so the suggestion of a 'spinach pie' doesn't seem particularly palatable.

The notion of mixing the topics of children and theology also strikes us as incongruous and maybe even distasteful. In many Christian circles, the word 'theology' evokes a response much like our reaction to spinach. Images of ancient scholars come to mind, cloistered away in a monastery, writing Latin with a quill pen. Many of us never choose to 'consume' theology unless it is out of a sense of ought, and then only rarely. We easily view theology as too abstract and irrelevant in a day when the 'practical' aspects of the Christian religion are perceived as more tasteful.

In contrast, children, like pie, bring to mind warm and cheerful thoughts. We visualize children at play, discovering a butterfly or giggling during a game of tag. Theirs is a world quite distant from the intellectual musings of the theologian. Children are the dessert of life, a gift of God to sweeten the taste of our existence.

It is not surprising, then, to learn that little has been written about children from a theological perspective. While there is an abundance of literature on Christian parenting, virtually all of it fails to examine the foundations of our understanding of children that the Bible provides. The Bible certainly gives directions to parents, but it offers much more. It speaks of the importance of children, their spiritual nature, their sinfulness and need for salvation, their behavioural tendencies, and their place in the Christian church. Yet these topics have gone largely ignored given our present day eagerness to find what works to make children behave.

This book is written to address this need for well-founded thought about caring for our children. I believe that a firm understanding of all the Bible teaches about children, placed

into a theological framework, will provide the only sufficient basis upon which to build methods of ministering to our children in our homes and churches. It is in such weighty reflection that we will find the full wealth of biblical counsel needed to protect our children in these ungodly days. The ills of the time demand serious medicine, and it is to be found in the ‘spinach pie’ I call a theology of children.

## **Preparing for the journey**

We are about to embark on an enlightening journey through the biblical teachings about children, and in doing so will be preparing ourselves to reach out to those little ones under our care. But a warning is in order before we begin. Let me explain. We observed earlier that secular thought has despaired of finding truth, and rightly so given its failure to consider the spiritual. Its response was to declare that there is no absolute truth to be found. No-one, then, is right nor is anyone wrong in forming ideas about what is. We saw that Christians have followed further down this path than we would wish, surrendering scriptural doctrine for the sake of a user-friendly gospel.

If we are to give full credit to all that the Bible says about children, we will have to tread on some admittedly delicate terrain. It will take us into issues that have caused controversy through the history of the church, and I have no expectation that mine will be the final word. I am a fallen creature and am quite confident that my thinking will undergo correctives when I reach my Father’s house. (That is not to mention that I will undoubtedly change some of my conclusions as I continue to study during my life here on earth!)

But we are not like secular scholars. As believers in absolute truth, we know that there are correct answers for all of the areas we will cover. Only our sin and fallen reason hide them from us. So, while I admit this book is not the final word, it is offered as a starting point for discussion. I believe that what you are about to read is a reasonably accurate description of what the Bible teaches, or I would not offer it to the public. I will undoubtedly upset some people with some of my conclusions. I won’t be surprised if most people disagree with me at some points. This

is a step toward the perfect truth of the counsel of God and, like any human interpretation, will fall short.

I ask you, the reader, to enter with an open mind. In discussing such topics as the fate of children dying in infancy, I have found many people to have strong sentiments but yet give little thought to why they hold them. You might reconsider your opinions. Some of you come from different denominational traditions and will not agree with my positions. I ask you to respond by giving thought to how you would develop a theology of children from your tradition. Believing that there is only one truth, I don't believe we can both be right, but I am confident there is great value in considering the nature and nurture of children from different perspectives as we share the goal of discerning the perfect truth of God.

I strongly encourage the reader prayerfully to consider the passages to be discussed and to read this book thoughtfully. I especially ask that you seek God's guidance in applying what you read to your work with children in whatever capacity you serve. I believe you will emerge from your time with this book with a new vision for children and new tools for ministry to them.

### **Who needs a theology of children?**

This leads to the final point of our introductory chapter, and that is to establish who might profit from this study. I believe there is benefit here for those who teach future pastors and teachers in higher education classes, and maybe even a theologian or two will be stimulated to reflect on the importance of children in the general study of theology.

Ministers are responsible for the spiritual care of their entire flocks, and that doubtlessly includes the little lambs. Pastors need to understand fully the matters affecting the care of their youngest and weakest members. (Whether children should be considered as 'members' of the church is a matter we will address later.) It is pastors who are often called at the birth of a child, who preside over the baptism or dedication of infants, who are consulted when children make a profession of faith, who are called upon for counsel by troubled parents, and who introduce children into the membership of the church at the appropriate time. Pastors provide leadership to the church's governing body

that is charged with providing a suitable context for education in the faith while at church, and encourage parents to do the same with their children at home. All those in ministry will do well to consider the discussion that follows. There is much to be said that can lead to a more faithful church ministry to children.

Yet, the 'front line' responsibility for the nurture of children rests with their parents, and the vital nature of the task of parenting challenges us to meet it with a thorough understanding of the place of children in the eyes of God. Similarly, other believers who minister to children can profit and enhance their work by this study. This includes church leaders and educators of all types, such as Sunday school teachers, school teachers, and home school teachers. The same applies to those who perform other 'professional' functions for children, such as physicians, counsellors, tutors and care-givers. Of course, all believers have a stake in the new generation, for it is the future of the church. In most churches all the members vow to participate in the lives of its children at dedications or baptisms, and Christian nurture is a task that falls to the body as a whole.

*Our Covenant with Kids* is addressed to all the faithful who are burdened for our children and their nurture in our churches and our homes. We see the vicious threats posed by the world around us and confess our piecemeal approaches to meeting the challenge of our children. We are eager to hear what the Word of God says about our little ones and to understand it as best we can. Only then will we be ready to develop strategies for ministry that adequately address their needs and lead them toward the faith. We commit ourselves to our children, for of such is the kingdom of God.