

Chapter Four

Biblical Perspectives on Developmental Grace for Nurturing Children's Spirituality¹

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What does the Bible say about a child's status before God and the child's relationship with God? Borrowing a phrase from the study of future things in theology, might we depict children as "already here, but not yet fully here"? Consider the following prayer from Marcy, aged eight. "Dear friendly God: I think you are like a regular person. I do not believe those people who say you are dead or far away. You probably live on the next street" (Heller, 1987, p. 32). Although very concrete and incomplete, her theological understandings are certainly perceptive. In the first segment of this chapter I present an argument from Scripture, summarized in the following two foundational claims, that clarifies a Christian understanding of this "in between" status of children, summarized in the following two foundational claims.²

(a) Children are different from adults and form a special class before God. Regarding matters of salvation and the Kingdom of God, children under the age of moral discernment/accountability are a unique class. Due to God's design for human development, children prior to becoming fully adults are given a measure of divine grace and blessing, and are regarded as being within some kind of "safe" zone until they arrive at the age of discernment. (b) Children are similar to adults in that they are persons created in the image of God and thus welcomed into experiencing a genuine relationship with God appropriate to their developmental abilities. These two important foundational parameters can offer church leaders, teachers and parents a balanced perspective for ministry with children.

In approaching the practice of children's ministry, two extreme positions must be avoided. On the one hand, it is certainly problematic to avoid *any* sensitivity to children's developmental processes and simply treat young children as little adults who already have fully developed adult capabilities.

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Here extreme urgency is the tone with teachers and parents, as they are in a hurry to get the child "saved," either by arranging infant baptism the day of birth or by urging the young child to make a profession of faith at the earliest age possible. On the other hand, to assume that genuine faith and discipleship are not possible during childhood is also problematic. Some churches, based on their understanding of the demands of adult discipleship posed by Jesus—such as self-denial, "hating" father and mother—would then deny *any* public and official welcoming of children prior to becoming morally accountable, until reaching their young adult years (e.g., 18 years of age).

After discussing the biblical data related to these issues, I will draw implications for the practice of Christian ministry with children in one important arena, nurturing the faith of children through corporate practices offered both *before* and *after* children reach an age of discernment. I come at this task not only as a seminary professor of Christian education and theology, but also as a parent, now of two young adults and as a former associate pastor who directed children's ministries and taught children of various ages. From infancy I have been nurtured through the teaching and mentoring of various children's ministries along with important post-childhood influences, experiences, and encounters with God. My earliest memory of serving God is as a sixth grader, running the slide projector for Mr. Woodhouse, who led Friday evening children's rallies. I continued active participation in church through my teen and adult years.

Children Are A Special Class in the Kingdom of God

In a world of adult privilege and responsibility, God has set a temporary and gracious "hedge" or boundary around children as a distinct class regarding eternal destiny. Ultimately, two cosmic kingdoms vie for allegiance, the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan (e.g., Matt. 12:26, 28; Col. 1:13). Accordingly, Scripture contrasts two basic classes of people in various ways (e.g., Ps. 1:1-6; Matt. 7: 13-27; Rom. 2:6-11; 1 Cor. 2:14-15; Eph. 2:1-10; 1 John. 3: 4-10; Rev. 21: 6-8): (a) believers or Christians—those within God's Kingdom, who have responded to God's gracious gift of salvation accomplished by the atoning work of our Lord Jesus Christ—and (b) non-believers or not-yet Christians—those still outside of the Kingdom of God. In a previous day, some would have used the popular labels "saved" and "unsaved."

Yet God has also set up a special third category for children who have not yet reached the developmental milestone of an age of moral, adult discernment.³ This class would also include those who probably may never reach that milestone due to some mental disability. The primary basis for this claim of special status is the concept of a developmental age of moral discernment/accountability. Despite the centrality of this concept for a theology of children's spirituality, extensive Biblical exposition and grounding of the concept have not always been undertaken. Perhaps the following survey of the key passages

will stimulate more in-depth analyses by Bible scholars and theologians to provide the needed grounding to guide a Christian approach in ministering with children.

Theologian Millard Erickson (1996) offers one succinct formulation for how to connect some of the theological dots relevant to the spiritual status of children.

Until the first conscious or responsible moral action or decision by a person, there is no imputation of the Adamic sin, just as there is no imputation of Christ's righteousness until there is a conscious acceptance of that work. In the case of the [Adamic] sin, there is a period at the beginning of life when one is not really capable of distinguishing between good and evil. This is because there is, in effect, actually no awareness of the concept of rightness and wrongness or of responsibility. This is prior to what we term the "age of accountability." (p. 250)

Thus from God's perspective regarding the plan of salvation, Erickson infers children are in a "safe" zone until they arrive at an age of discernment. Of course, more dots—other theological issues—will need to be connected; a brief discussion of these issues is offered later.

First, some general verses from the New Testament indicating some kind of developmental distinctions between children and adults will be considered (1 Cor. 13:9-11 and John 9:20-21). The major grounding for the age of discernment concept will come from two passages in the Hebrew Scriptures. Deuteronomy 1:39 and Isaiah 7:15-16 (and 8:4) make a clear reference to a child's time in life when there is not yet any knowledge of good or evil (cf. Gen. 2:9, 3:22). Furthermore, to complete the biblical study, three additional passages support some kind of distinctive developmental class of children will be examined: Jeremiah 19:4-5, Jonah 4:11, and Nehemiah 8:2. Finally, evidence for the special class of children will be drawn from theological formulations regarding the eternal destiny of infants who die.

New Testament Passages

1 Corinthians 13:9-11

In this passage, Paul's general affirmation of developmental differentiation can be discerned:

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. (1 Cor. 13:9-11, The New International Version)

The Apostle Paul draws on the commonplace developmental distinctions between childhood and adulthood as a metaphorical analogy. Paul wishes to highlight the difference between current adult capacity for knowing as compared to the more complete kind of knowing believers will have when Christ returns. Although not a literal reference to child development, Paul's analogy only works if it is accepted that childhood and adulthood are different classes with differing capacities.

John 9:20-21

When Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth, his parents responded with hesitation to the judgmental questioning of the religious leaders.

We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is *of age*. He will speak for himself (John 9:20-21, New Revised Standard Version, as in subsequent citations unless otherwise noted, emphasis added).

George Beasley-Murray (1987) explains, "He is of age' signifies that he has passed his thirteenth birthday, and so attained the age of legal responsibility" (p. 157).

Passages from the Hebrew Scriptures

Deuteronomy 1:39

The book of Deuteronomy is largely made up of Moses' exhortation to the Israelites while camped in Moab. Following forty years of wandering in the Sinai wilderness, they were about to cross over the Jordan River into the Promised Land (what would become Israel). In chapters 1-4, Moses provides an historical review of God's faithfulness to them as well as reminding them of God's judgment on their parents for their disobedience. Chapter 1:26-40 summarizes Israel's critical moment of rebellion at Kadesh Barnea, where they refused to trust God's promise and enter the Land. God confirmed their wish: all of the adults 20 years old and up—with the exception of Joshua and Caleb—would not enter the Land (Num. 14:28-31).⁴ They would all die in the desert and then their children, the next generation, would enter the land:

And as for your little ones, who you thought would become booty, *your children, who today do not yet know right from wrong*, they shall enter there; to them I will give it, and they shall take possession of it (emphasis added)(Deut. 1:39, cf. Num. 14:31).

J. G. McConville (2002) explains what is of primary concern in this verse, "The

next generation is now characterized as not knowing the difference between right and wrong. That is, at this moment ('today'), they are not morally responsible (cf. Is. 7:15) They are, indeed, guiltless with respect to the failure to enter the land at the first command" (p. 72).

Isaiah 7:14-15 and 8:4

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet addresses the southern tribes of Israel, known as "Judah,"⁵ around the period of 740 to 700 B.C., in a time when Assyria was the dominant political and military world power in the Ancient Near East (about 900-650 B.C.). One of the key themes in the first half of the book—chapters 1-39—is whether Israel will trust God or Assyria. In chapters 7-8, God challenges King Ahaz to trust in him, and invites Ahaz to ask God for a sign of His trustworthiness (Isa. 7:10-11). The king need not fear an attack from the Arameans (or Syrians; capital in Damascus) or the ten tribes of Israel (or Ephraim; capital in Samaria; Isa. 7:1-9); nor should he rely on a political alliance with Assyria. But Ahaz declines, claiming he does not want to "test the Lord" (Isa. 7:12), something forbidden in the Law (Num. 14:22, Deut. 6:16). Yet, as John Oswalt (2003) explains, "the testing referred to in the Torah is *not* believing God's promises!" (p.139, emphasis added). In spite of Ahaz's unbelief, God will give a sign; a child to be born to Isaiah.

He [the predicted son, child of Isaiah] shall eat curds and honey by the time he *knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good*. For before the child *knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good*, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. (Isa. 7:15-16, emphasis added)

To understand the passage, first, a clarification of the historical context is offered and then an explanation of the particular phrases relevant to the concept of an age of discernment. John Oswalt (2003) pieces together the disparate details in the following manner. Isaiah the prophet, already had a son Shear-jashub—whose name meant "a remnant shall return," as mentioned in Isa. 7:3—by his first wife. Apparently she has since died, making the prophet a single parent. As a widower, Isaiah now predicts that he, Isaiah, will father another child with an unmarried woman—"the prophetess" in 8:3—whom he will be marrying in the near future. In Isaiah 8:1-3 that prophecy is fulfilled. Following their marriage and conception of the child, this boy was finally born and given the name, Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Isa. 8:1,3).

Regarding the meaning of the words "good and evil" in Isaiah 7:15-16, Oswalt (2003) offers this commentary.

Before this child who is shortly to be conceived is able to "reject the wrong and choose the right" (7:15-16), Syria and Israel will be destroyed.

This phrase most likely refers to the age of accountability, the time when, in later parlance, a boy became a 'son of the commandment' [cf. Gen. 2:17]. Although this is now considered to occur at age twelve, there is no precise statement of the age in the Bible. (p. 111)

Oswalt (1986) also provides more detail about the timing of the conquest for both neighboring nations. If the prophecy was given in 735 B.C., and the child was born in 734 B.C., before the child could clearly speak (cf. 8:4), destruction and plunder would occur. Damascus was destroyed in 732 B.C., and both Rezin, king of Aram (Syria), and Pekah king of Israel died about that time. Furthermore, much of Israel's territory was reduced to that of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Yet Israel's own destruction took place later, as Oswalt explains.

But it is also true that it was not until some *twelve or thirteen years* later that Samaria [i.e., Israel] was destroyed and Israel ceased to exist. On balance, given the evident connection of the phrase with [the age of] moral discernment at several points, and given the lack of clear evidence to the contrary, the best interpretation seems to be that by the time the child has reached *an age of official accountability*, both of the threatening powers will have ceased to exist. (p. 214, emphasis added)

Jeremiah 19:4-5

As the prophet denounces the sins of the people, Jeremiah connects the word "the innocent" (verse 4) with "children" (verse 5):

Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have filled this place with the blood of *the innocent*, and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their *children* in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind (Jer. 19:4-5, emphasis added).⁶

Douglas R. Jones (1992) explains,

The shedding of innocent blood, in the Old Testament, refers usually to the miscarriage of justice, and particularly to the wrongful application of the law of vengeance. . . . But here the use of the plural shows that the familiar language is applied to the innocents who were victims of the child sacrifice practiced in Hinnom (see 7:31); 'this place' is therefore Hinnom. (p. 266)

Jonah 4:11

In the last verse of the book of Jonah, God highlights his mercy to the Gentile people of the Assyrian capital in Nineveh, particularly their children who did not yet know “their right hand from their left.”

And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals? (Jon. 4:11)

Jewish commentator Uriel Simon (1999) explains that “their right hand from their left” refers “specifically to children, that is, to those Ninevites who lack understanding on the ethico-religious plane.”⁷ (p. 47)

Nehemiah 8:2

When the postexilic Israelite community had finishing building the wall, they requested Ezra the priest and scribe to read the Law in a public worship time. On the first day of the seventh month, accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and *all* who *could* hear with understanding (Neh. 4:2, emphasis added). Children who could understand also participated, as Charles Fensham (1982) clarifies: “We take it, however, in the sequence men, women, and all who could understand, as referring to children who have reached the stage of understanding.”

In summary, Deuteronomy 1:39 and Isaiah 7:15-16 with corroboration from Jeremiah 14:9-10, Jonah 4:11, and Nehemiah 8:2, provide clear guidance from the Bible that children prior to a certain age of discernment do not yet have a fully conscious knowledge of the difference between good and evil. Based on Isaiah 7:15-16, it is possible that this age of discernment comes around 12 or 13 years of age.

Theological Affirmations of Developmental Distinctions

Beyond the biblical data, various theologians throughout church history have recognized developmental distinctions as Barbara Pitkin (2001) explains, “Like many of [Calvin’s] contemporaries [e.g., Luther] and classical and medieval predecessors [e.g., Aquinas], Calvin divides childhood into three stages, each lasting approximately seven years [i.e., to age seven, to age fourteen, and to age twenty-one]” (p. 164).

Furthermore, almost all Christian theologians who have considered the issue of the eternal destiny of infants who have died have recognized the distinctive class of children by a making special case for children going to heaven *without* having made a conscious response to God’s offer of salvation in Christ. Factors to be considered in developing a theological statement on the matter include the following:

1. All humans have been created in the image of God (e.g., Gen. 1:26-27, Ps. 8, Jas. 3:9).
2. Since the Fall, all humans come into this world under God’s judgment and wrath as being in sin, (i.e., “original sin;” e.g., Rom. 3:23, 5:12, 6:23, Eph. 2:1-3) and all are in need of God’s gracious salvation (e.g., John 3:3-8).
3. Only Jesus Christ’s substitutionary atoning death propitiates God’s wrath against all sin and makes reconciliation with God possible (e.g., Rom. 3:22-26, 5:6-11, Acts 4:12, Col. 2:13-4).
4. As a part of receiving God’s gracious offer of salvation, one must consciously and responsibly believe, placing one’s faith and reliance—involving repentance—in Jesus Christ (e.g., Luke. 24:46-47, John 1:12, 3:16, Rom. 10:9-10). For the final issue, the term “responsibly” implies some measure of moral awareness and competence to recognize one’s own sinful condition, need for God’s grace and conscious reception of God’s gracious offer.
5. Each one must give an account to God of their life on earth (Rom. 14:12).

The task, then, is to synthesize and integrate these foundational theological teachings with the biblical teaching of a child’s special status before God. Will a dying infant spend eternity with God in heaven? Three *logical* options are possible: (a) All children who die go to heaven, (b) some children who die, go to heaven, and (c) no children who die go to heaven. Table 4.1 surveys the diverse views offered within Christianity—including Protestant and Roman Catholic, liberal and conservative—culled primarily from helpful summaries by R. A. Webb (1907), John Sanders (1992), Millard Erickson (1996) and Timothy Sisemore (2000), and organized according to the first two categories of “a” and “b” (I know of no published claim for option “c”). Notice that each view, except for the simplest view of physical baptism (view 5a), in some way recognizes that children are a unique case, distinct from adults, by stipulating some special condition in the matter of dying infants.

In summary, there is biblical support for the claim that children are a class distinct from adults in relation to moral discernment, a concept also recognized by theologians in their treatment of the status of infants who die. Both church and society have affirmed certain boundaries between childhood and adulthood, as Marlin Jeschke (1983) clarifies,

Pedobaptist churches recognize [the age of discernment] in the practice of confirmation. Judaism has its ‘bar mitzvah,’ or ‘bas mitzvah,’ when a child becomes a ‘son’ or ‘daughter’ of the law [at age 13]. Secular society makes a definite distinction between juveniles and adults in courts of law. It establishes a minimum age for marriage. It protects children through labor laws (p. 112).⁸

Of course the exact timing of the arrival of the age of discernment will vary

Table 4.1: Theological Evidence: Views of Dying Infants Going to Heaven

Option A: *All Children Who Die Go To Heaven.*

1. *Universalism:* The fatherhood of God brings universal salvation regardless of moral condition of all infants. [Liberal]
2. *Innocence:* All infants are innocent. Variations on this theme:
 - (a) Infants have no original sin, thus no need for personal salvation. [Pelagius]
 - (b) God's intervening (prevenient) grace applies the benefits of Christ's atonement to all, including infants, thus nullifying the guilt of infants' original sin. [John Wesley]
 - (c) God's intervening grace applies the benefits of Christ's atonement to all infants, thus nullifying the guilt of infants' original sin [Charles Hodge]
3. *Election:* (a) All dying infants have been elected by God for salvation. Other elect infants and all non-elect infants will grow up beyond the age of accountability and will consciously sin affirming their sinful nature. [C. H. Spurgeon]
 (b) (Combining Views #2c and #3a) All dying elect infants are "innocent" since they have not ratified their Adamic nature, not having reached the age of accountability. [M. Erickson, many Arminians]

Option B: *Some Children Who Die Will Go To Heaven.*

4. *Covenantal/Believing Parent:*(a) All dying infants from families with at least one believing parent (1 Cor 7:14) have been elected by God for salvation (whereas other elect infants will grow to maturity). [Richard Baxter, Synod of Dordt]
 (b) Primarily all dying infants from families with at least one believing parent have been elected, but God may elect others outside the covenant. [Westminster Confession]
5. *Sacramental:* (a) Only dying infants who have been physically baptized will go to heaven. The Church's baptism of infants is the necessary means of regeneration to be in right standing with God. [Augustine; Roman Catholic: Council of Trent; Lutheran Augsburg Confession]
 (b) If parents had wanted their dying child to be baptized (labeled as a "baptism of desire or intention"), this would be counted as a baptism and thus the child would go to heaven. [Martin Luther, many Lutherans, many Roman Catholics]
 (c) The eternal destiny of dying unbaptized infants is neither heaven nor hell but *limbus infantum* (children's limbo), a special place of neither joy nor punishment. [former medieval Catholic view]
6. *Responsible Consent:* (a) God will assign the appropriate place of destiny for the dying infant in light of God's knowledge of what the infant would have decided had the infant grown to maturity. [Middle Knowledge view]
 (b) After death—during the intermediate state—infants will grow to their age of accountability and will then be capable of receiving or rejecting God's gracious offer of salvation. [John Sanders, Greg Boyd]
7. *Cautious/Agnostic:* One really does not know how or why; the matter is solely in God's hands. God will assign the appropriate place of destiny for the dying infant in light of his bountiful love, just wisdom, and gracious mercy.

among children due to differing individual and environmental factors—such as family life, degree of psychological health, educational opportunities—yet a very general or average demarcation around age 13 might be affirmed, occurring about the same time as the onset of puberty with its evident physical manifestations. Prior to this milestone event, whenever it is reached by each individual, a child does not yet have sufficient moral cognitive, emotional, and social development to make responsible decisions in matters of good and evil, particularly in relation to the child's accountability before God. There is a measure of developmental grace. Yet on the human plane, children are increasingly morally accountable for their words and actions.

Children Are Blessed by God and Can Relate with God

Although children do not have full adult capabilities, nonetheless Scripture supplies sufficient evidence that children are blessed by God's favor and that children have the capacity to have a relationship with God. The Hebrew Scriptures support the idea that God has a special place in His heart for orphans (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 10:14; Hosea 14:3; also Jas. 1:27). From cases of children, both Jewish and non-Jewish, a child can (a) be consecrated by God from the womb (e.g., Samson, Judg. 13:5; Isaiah, Isa. 49:1; Jeremiah, Jer. 1:5; John the Baptist, Luke 1:15); (b) hear God speaking (e.g., Samuel, 1 Sam 3:1-14), (c) receive God's intervention by healing (daughter of a Gentile woman, Matt 15:21-28) and being raised from the dead (son of a Gentile widow, 1 Kings 17:8-14, cf. Luke 4:26), and (d) become a king in God's theocratic economy for Israel (e.g., Joash at age seven, 2 Chron. 24:1-2). Also 2 Samuel 12:23 is a classic passage on the status of a dying infant. When the child resulting from King David's adulterous union with Bathsheba died, David stopped fasting and praying for the child. He offered this reason, "But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? *I will go to him*, but he will not return to me" (2 Sam. 2:23, emphasis added). The implication is that David, in the after life, will see his child again.

In the Gospels, the classic passage indicating children's status within the Kingdom of God and God's blessing on children is when Jesus permitted the children to come to him (Mark 10:14 and 16; parallel Matt. 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17):

But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them [his disciples], "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; *for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these*. . . ." And He took them in His arms and began *blessing* them, laying His hands upon them (Mark 10:14, New American Standard Version, emphasis added).

New Testament scholars offer the following comment on the phrase, "the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

1. "This text cannot simply refer to those adults who are childlike to the exclusion of actual young children being brought to Jesus. It can refer to both" (Witherington, 2001, p. 279; on Mark 10:14).

2. "Jesus replies by stating that the kingdom belongs to children and people like them" (Marshall, 1978, p. 681; on Luke 18:16).

3. "Even little children find their place in [the kingdom]. Little children indeed intrinsically have an affinity for the kingdom. They too in their way are members of the community of faith" (Hagner, 1995, p. 553 on Matthew 19:13-15).

4. "A more emphatic statement of children's reception into the reign of God by Jesus could hardly be made" (Gundry-Volf, 2001, p. 38).⁹

Finally, a reference to Jesus' own childhood must be included as an indication for the child's capability to relate with God and be blessed by God. Although Jesus Christ is fully God, due to the incarnation, he also became and is fully human, being born as child, and experiencing all the phases of childhood development according to God's design, as recorded in two verses that introduce and conclude Jesus' twelve-year old visit to the temple:

1. "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40, New Revised Standard Version).

2. "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2:52).

Furthermore, Jesus walked in the power of the Holy Spirit as an adult (e.g., Luke 4:1, 16; Acts 10:38). Was this solely an adult lifestyle and pattern? In his comment on Luke 2:47, when the child Jesus amazed the religious teachers in the temple, Earle Ellis (1974) explains that the use of the term "amazed" was

... intended not just as a tribute to Jesus' intelligence but as a witness to his relationship to God. Luke often uses the word to express the reaction to the present working of the divine power of the coming age. The same 'Holy Spirit' power, later to be manifested in Jesus' ministry, *even now is at work*. Jesus interprets the Scripture not from the knowledge gained in rabbinic training but from the 'wisdom' given by God. (p. 86. emphasis added)

Following the example of Jesus is not only an ideal for adults, but also for children. Jesus' own childhood demonstrates the possibility and capability for children to be blessed by God and to be guided by the Spirit.¹⁰

From birth on—and perhaps in the womb as well—children are receptive to God's overtures and interventions in their lives. Teachers and leaders can help *all* children seek God and enter into a growing relationship with him.

Practical Implications

The main purpose of this chapter has been to develop a biblical argument for two main points: (a) the special case of the child in God's program, in light of developmental factors, and (b) that a child is blessed by God and capable of relating with God. But these truths do not in themselves offer complete guidance. In the remaining section, implications are offered to illustrate the process of transferring these biblical claims into practical means for nurturing the faith of children. If, as most theologians hold, *dying* infants are welcomed by God, would it not be wise, then, to offer the *living* children in the midst of the church, a similar special welcome during their days prior to the age of discernment?

The church that welcomes children will offer opportunities for instruction and commitment-making *before* and *after* children reach the age of discernment/accountability. With a continuing ministry emphasis on both sides of this developmental milestone, these children-turned-adults can continue to affirm their relationship with God—or not affirm it, if that is their choice. Influencing children's spirituality and character formation cannot wait until they are older. They are learning creatures from day one of life. Yet the appropriate time to discern whether the child will *continue in discipleship* is in adulthood, not in childhood. Thus, until the arrival of adulthood, the appropriate posture for the church is to follow the example of Jesus by *welcoming* children as members of the Kingdom of God and nurturing their faith in God as much as possible.¹¹

Furthermore, both children and adults will experience degrees of these twin tensions: (a) love from God and (b) estrangement from God. There is no need to emphasize one to the neglect of the other. Adult believers, although within the family of God, are both saint and sinner this side of heaven, as Luther claimed. One can affirm this tension in teaching ministry with children as well, as appropriate to their developmental capacities, that God loves them and desires to relate with them, and that as well, they are estranged from God. Teachers and parents can share from their own journey this continuing tension in their lives.

The following practical suggestions are offered to stimulate further discussion. Proposals address the path of children from birth until they reach the young adult age of 21, with a sensitivity to distinctive church traditions regarding timing of baptism—infant baptism, adult or believer's baptism, or child baptism.

Ceremonies and Practices that Can Nurture Children's Faith

When children's ministry leaders focus *solely* on one age-level—infant, toddler, pre-school, early or later elementary—the spiritual nurture of children is limited. Children are best served when leaders chart an integrated path for the "developmental career" in all related ministry programs of the child from birth through entering the young adult years. Rather than leave these

independent age-level units of instruction detached as a handful of pearls, why not string the pearls together for a more holistic approach? Table 4.2 proposes one framework, to serve as an illustration for church leaders to construct and develop a contextualized model fitting their respective tradition.¹²

Table 4.2: Nurturing Children's Faith Through Corporate 'Family' Classes and Ceremonies

A. Rites of Passage for Child/Teen	B. Public Ceremony: Progressively Welcoming Child into God's Household of Faith	C. Individual Readiness & Suggested Age Ranges	D. Educational Preparation Prior to Public Ceremony
1. Church Family Reception	*[1] Infant Baptism or [2,3] Parent-Child Dedication (as child grows, participates in main worship meeting as appropriate) [1,2,3] White carnation placed at front of auditorium, symbolizing growing sense of new birth (children's sermons in main worship as one way to welcome children)	Part 1: Following birth, during child's first year Part 2: Ages 5-13 years; as acquiring moral accountability; making a personal profession of faith; determined on an individual basis	Orientation class for parents, grandparent, sponsors, godparents Pastoral interview with child and parent(s) to assess personal commitment to Jesus Christ
2. Church Family Presentation	[1,2] First Communion or [3] Child Baptism & Communion (now eligible to use gifts to serve)	Ages 5-13 years; as acquiring moral accountability; during elementary school period; determined on an individual basis	Orientation class for child and parent(s) (4-8 sessions; weekend retreat)
3. Church Family Re-Affirmation	[1,3] Public Affirmation of Faith or [2] Adult Baptism (increasing use of gifts to serve)	Ages 13-18 years, with full onset of moral accountability; determined on an individual basis	Mentoring and doctrine catechism classes for teen (1-2 years prior to ceremony; [see Osmer])
4. Church Family Vocational Commissioning	[1,2,3] Vocational Commissioning with laying on of hands (now eligible to serve in a church leadership capacity)	Age 18 years, with full-time employment, at start of career; determined on an individual basis (perhaps another at age 30 years)	Orientation class on vocation

*Numbers identify specific church traditions that practice [1] infant baptism, [2] adult baptism, or [3] child baptism

As a minimum, four factors should be considered in developing such a model: (a) working out an appropriate scheme of age ranges fitting knowledge of child development and church history (column "C") by designating respective "phases" or rites of passage that can serve as milestones and indicators of movement for children/teens through their "developmental career" (column "A"), (b) integrating and welcoming children's ministry into the adult ministry through distinctive public ceremonies that take place during the main worship meeting, appropriate to each church tradition (numbers in square brackets in column "B" indicate the three main traditions for baptism), (c) providing or requiring supportive educational sessions/classes to orient and prepare participants for this particular milestone in the child's/teen's development (column "D"), and (d) progressively welcoming children, by increasing the child's/teen's participation in the main church ministry over the years (suggestions in parentheses in Column "B").

Participation in Holy Communion is a powerful symbol of welcome for children as well as adults. In traditions that practice adult baptism, how might children be welcomed at the Lord's Table? Consideration might be given to permit the child's participation in Communion once an initial profession of faith has been made and assessed. Smith (2001) also suggests,

In the traditions that baptize adult believers, an open approach to the Table would acknowledge that children are members of the covenant community even though they cannot yet assume adult responsibility for their lives, evidenced in baptism. For now they come to the Table under the spiritual authority and identity of their parents. And they are welcome. (p. 217)

In summary, church leaders should design appropriate official and contextual means to welcome children as Jesus did. In this way, as argued earlier, they honor the example and teaching of Jesus, and welcome and bless children because "the kingdom of God belongs to such *as these* [i.e., includes]" (Mark 10:14), as argued earlier. Otherwise, adults emulate the disciples and marginalize children, keeping them invisible until they become adults. By this exclusionary practice, children are treated as second-class citizens of the Kingdom, or, worse, as "outsiders" altogether and as a result the church risks losing them to the world. Children belong to a distinctive class in God's program; they are not little adults, but they are blessed by God and able to relate with God.

A Practice for Teens to Re-Affirm Their Faith

The practice of Confirmation has a long history in liturgical traditions that hold to infant baptism. In his book-length treatment of the history of the practice, Richard Osmer (1996), Professor of Christian Education at Princeton Seminary, proposes a few modifications to re-invigorate this important developmental milestone in which a teen, now with increasing adult capacities of reasoning and understanding, can re-affirm his or her faith. One critical component is emphasizing the individual developmental readiness of a young teen to make a public re-affirmation of his or her faith, rather than just making it a routine group phenomenon that occurs for all at the same age.

If the church is to grant a more important place to personal appropriation of faith for theological reasons, then it must be willing to allow the element of personal choice to be real. . . . The church cannot claim to support a genuinely free and personal profession of faith as long as it continues a programmatic approach to confirmation in which young people automatically enter this program when they reach a certain age. . . . The church would do well to become clear about its theological commitments and then shape its practice accordingly. (Osmer, 1996, p. 196)

Although this historic practice has *not* been a part of my own faith tradition, as a Christian educator I see the value of developing this rite of passage of "Re-affirmation" as an important means for all Christian churches to help sustain

and nurture the faith of teens who have passed to the age of discernment.

Conclusion

Nurturing the faith of children and teens is a complex theological and practical endeavor, however, only a few theological and practical issues could be addressed here.¹³ The biblical instructions are clear. Welcome and bless children as Jesus did, since they are a unique developmental class in God's Kingdom program, distinct from adults. God has provided children a measure of developmental grace, before they become adults, to grow in their faith and experience God. Leaders, teachers, and parents will need to learn how to be sensitive to and respect this divine design and come alongside these little ones with love and grace, and without hurrying them or making judgments. Adults must avoid marginalization of youngsters. Childhood is a special season to nurture faith in ways appropriate to developmental capacities.¹⁴ Frankie's prayer represents an ideal for children, an outcome that those working with children would love to see deeply acquired by these special ones.

Jesus, I feel very near to you. I feel like you are beside me all the time. Please be with me on Thursday. I am running in a 3-mile race then. I will need all the speed in the world. If you are not busy with other things, maybe you could be at the starting line, the finish line, and everywhere in between. Frankie [age 11] (Heller, 1987, p. 22).

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(Endnotes)

¹ Appreciation is expressed to Cathy Stonehouse and Holly Allen for helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

² See Gundry-Volf (2001) for a thorough study of New Testament passages on children, with various citations of previous work in the field of biblical studies on the topic of children.

³ For sake of brevity, I will generally use the term “children” to signify those who have not yet reached the age of discernment.

⁴ This age marker, 20 years old, would set a very generous upper limit for arriving at the age of adult moral discernment and responsibility.

⁵ “Judah” represented the two southern tribes of Israel, Judah and Benjamin. The remaining ten tribes of the north were called “Israel,” “Ephraim,” or sometimes “Jacob.”

⁶ Also see Thompson (1980), p. 449; F. Huey (1993), p. 187; and Lundblom (1999), p. 839.

⁷ Simon (1999) explains, “‘their right hand from their left.’ That is, between good and evil. . . . Normally, in biblical Hebrew, the collective noun ‘*adam*’ (rendered above as ‘persons’) refers to an entire human population—especially when paired with the word ‘beast’ (e. g., Josh. 11:14; Jer.32:43). In the present case, however, context demands that the word refers only to a part of the whole population. Here we must evidently gloss [explain, interpret] it—following Rashi, Samuel ben Meir (on Num. 23:9), Ibn Ezra, David Kimhi, and others—as referring specifically to children, that is, to those Ninevites who lack understanding on the ethico-religious plane” (p. 46-47). Simon then makes a reference to the other passages discussed earlier, Deut. 1:39 and Isa. 7:15-16.

⁸ It appears that the classic framework of periods of seven years continues to under gird the American criminal justice system, as noted by Bob Pugsley, Professor of Southwestern Law School. “Children under 7 are not responsible for their actions under the law. Children 7-14 are usually not responsible. If prosecutors can prove the young offender knew what he or she was doing, they can charge the child with a crime. Children over 14 should know what they are doing. They will be charged unless they are found to be insane” (Pepper, Rams & Walker, 2004, p. A25).

⁹ Gundry-Volf (2001) understands Jesus’ statement within Paul’s more restrictive stance from 1 Corinthians 7:14: “Children *qua* children in this sense [their vulnerability and powerlessness]—referring presumably to children within the covenant community—are the *intended* recipients of the reign of God” (p. 38).

¹⁰ In previous article I claimed, “If Jesus as a child could walk so closely with the Spirit, it opens up new possibilities for children, if parents and teachers can show them how to walk with the Spirit.” Issler (2000, p. 12, footnote 21). For further exploration of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in childhood, see Hawthorne (1991) and Issler (2003); on the topic of Christian spirituality, see Issler (2001).

¹¹ Offering comfort to grieving parents is one prod to arrive at some theological view on this difficult issue. Yet one must also be cautious regarding the logical implications of a particular view, if taken to an extreme, as represented in the “infanticide problem.” This particular issue was brought to national prominence in the case of mother Andrea Yates who drowned her five children in the bathtub. Why? “She told a jail psychiatrist that her bad mothering had made the kids ‘not righteous,’ and, as a result, they would ‘perish in the fires of hell.’ If she killed them while they were young, God would show mercy on their soul.” (Gesalman, 2002, p. 8). Both pastoral sensitivity and thoughtful theological deliberation are required on this complex and very personal issue.

¹² The idea of developing these corporate practices originally came from Sparkman (1983) and a previous version appeared in Issler and Habermas (1994, p. 150).

¹³ Many theological issues remain to be addressed, such as how the atonement of Christ is applied to an infant who dies and has no conscious faith at that time; why God permits the demonization of innocent children (e.g., Mk 9:14); why innocent children have died for the sins of their parents (e.g., Jewish: Korah’s rebellion, Num 16:27-33; Gentile nations: Deut 2:33-34); discerning the indwelling and filling of the Spirit in young children; as well as further historical study of the concept of an age of accountability.

¹⁴ Work on this project was initially begun in the late 1980’s. Resources on biblical theological discussions related to children that I have found helpful include Erickson (1996), Jeschke (1983), Osmer (1996), Smith (2001, ch. 9), Cragoe (1987), Ingle (1970), Nash (1999), Sisemore (2000), Sparkman (1983), Strange (1996), Volf-Gundry (2001), Waggoner (1999), Webb (1907), Warfield (1897), and Zuck (1996).

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