

# Children and the House Church

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Many have written HCC to ask about kids. The treatment below attempts to deal with the question biblically and theologically, rather than psychologically or experientially.

## The Conversion of Children

Before picking up the practical aspects dealing with children in the house church environment, it would be well to consider the problem in terms of the desired outcome. What is our our *real* objective regarding our kids? Surely we want something more than simply keeping them from bothering adult fellowship.

I suggest that a worthy objective would be to bring our children up in a manner that will most likely bring about their knowing God and Jesus Christ (Jn. 17:3). Of course, we have to point out that any approach to the hoped for conversion of our loved ones comes with no guarantees. Our aim can only be to incorporate children into our Christian activities in a manner that helps them become sensitive to what the Holy Spirit is doing--not to manipulate them into "non-believers' baptism" or try to scare them into heaven with talk of damnation and eternal fire.

A fascinating case study of child conversion is found in Pierson's biography of George Müller, the builder of the famous Christian orphan houses of Bristol, England, in the nineteenth century. Yes, the children were given regular biblical instruction along with their other lessons, but Müller did not simply let the matter go at that. Pierson writes of special "revival" activities, as in the following heart-warming testimony:

In January and February, 1860, another mighty wave of the Holy Spirit power swept over the institution. It began among the little girls, from six to nine years old, then extended to the older girls, and then to the boys, until, inside of ten days, above two hundred were inquiring and in many instances found immediate peace. The young converts at once asked to hold prayer meetings among themselves, and were permitted; and not only so, but many began to labour and pray for others, and, out of the seven hundred orphans then in charge, some two hundred sixty were shortly regarded as either converted or in a most hopeful state.<sup>1</sup>

**That**, I think, is what we would like to see happen to our own youngsters. Pierson indicates that these kids did not merely confess "I want to be baptized," but they had a faith that was based on a genuine experience with the Spirit of God. They quickly put that faith into action on behalf of other children.

## Rearing the Kids

Well meaning Christians take a number of paths in rearing their kids. Here are a few examples:

### ***The Institutional Approach***

So often we see the joy (relief?) of young family who manages (by manipulation or otherwise) to "Lead their children to Christ." Once the child is baptized, the parents regard their task as complete. Too often, the youngster goes on to higher education, hears the gospel of the world, and ends up repudiating his or her faith.

### **Isolation.**

Some parents, very aware of the problem, choose to keep their children out of the clutches of secular teachers. They seek a "Christian" school, or they may even home school. Now I don't want to tear down the dedicated parents who sacrifice so richly their own time and resources to follow these alternatives, but the problem still remains. Home or Christian school cannot go on forever. Sooner or later the world will have its chance to win away our kids. If the child does not go to college or graduate school, eventually he or she will end up listening to some of the material on television, books, newspapers, or movies, and will be tantalized by stuff that is new and seductive. This was the problem of ancient Israel: the Canaanites were never driven out of the valleys, and the Israelites were forever tempted by the sensual aspects of pagan worship.

Yes, Moses made it very clear that the younger generation was to be trained in the ways of God. Prov. 22:6 even promises us results! But, it is dangerous to depend too much on Proverbs. So often, parents beat their kids with "the rod" because of Prov. 13:24, 23:13-14, 29:15. Yes--the "rod" is necessary, but are we to use it to **beat** the kids? The "rod" (Heb., *sebet*) is the staff of the shepherd (see Lev. 27:32), so often associated with Jesus the good shepherd, that is used to hook the wayward lamb by the neck and gently guide it back on to the path.

Therefore, I find both of the above methods wanting. I would want the children to come to know God and Jesus Christ experientially. I would want them to see their parent's own joy at worshipping and obeying the Lord of Creation. I would want the children to know that, to their parents, spending time with God is as important and as commonplace to human existence as bread, and that

**One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.** (*Deut 8:3, Mt. 4:4, etc.*)

Once children have **this** kind of understanding of God, they will be prepared to endure the seductive tensions of the world. Parents must, of course, warn their children that a time will come for them to go out into the world on their own. The reality of their upbringing will not be found in the counterfeit reality that lies outside of the saving community of faith. They must face that world and do their part to witness to it, but it will not be easy.

## **Children in the Home Church**

In light of the above discussion, it is quite clear to me that the manner that home churches deal with children must have the following characteristics:

- Children must witness their parent's life in the Lord. That means in the home, during prayer times, and also (especially?) in the corporate setting that is at the heart of house church theology.
- Children must be catechized--but not excessively. Redemption does not lie in catechism. Like any other lessons, parents should be on the lookout for those "teachable moments" when a child asks a question or makes a comment on his or her own initiative.
- Yet, children must not be allowed to cause unreasonable disruption of the community at worship.

Reconciling these is not always easy. There are some children, particularly at certain ages, where supervised separation from the worshipping community is necessary--and it cannot always be one member of the body that is assigned to deal with this. Here are some options that come to mind:

1. It is best when children can play quietly in the same room that parents are worshipping. Quiet toys, crayons, etc., should be fine--the children should not be expected to understand what people are saying and doing. The objective is for them to know that the house church worship is important to their parents--understanding can come later.
2. When children must be separated from the fellowship, it is best to rotate babysitting activities among the group--both men and women--rather than making it the problem of one or two individuals who are thus deprived of the joy of Christian fellowship.
3. Consider hiring an outsider to mind the children--someone who may not necessarily be a believer, but someone who respects the faith of the parents. In my view, the fee should be divided equally among the fellowship for this service.
4. When children are separated in this way, they should often be given a chance to return on good behavior.
5. The views of the children should be respected when they want to contribute to the group. It is not wise, however, to make too big a fuss over every little thing that a child does right, like making up a prayer or memorizing a verse or two from scripture, as doing so can too easily be interpreted by the child as a "works" theology.

I cannot stress too strongly the importance of involving children in the worshipping community as often as possible. Consider Exodus 33:7-10. When God is present, the response of onlookers can only be one thing--worship. They need to be aware that the invisible but powerful Holy Spirit is among you.

## Obscurancy

If you have studied the house church theology presented on these pages carefully, you will have discovered little sympathy for Christians who's approach to the Word of Truth is obscurant. Bernard Ramm defined the problem in this way:

Obscurantism is the denial of the validity of modern learning. It is the stock method used by people who feel that modern learning threatens their beliefs. Obscurantism (secular and religious) has three characteristics: (1) It is selective, because the obscurantists must live in the modern technological society, which they can neither deny nor ignore. They therefore must select out those elements they must accept in order to live in the twentieth century. (2) It is hypocritical, for in every instance people who follow obscurantist tactics use elements of modern technological society to promote their obscurantist beliefs; for example, the telephone, the modern television industry, and modern office equipment with its electronic and computer technology. (3) It is systematic, for at any and all points where modern learning may undermine an obscurantist position such learning must be denied.<sup>2</sup>

It is simply not true that an educated person cannot have a saving faith. Believers can certainly live out their lives in an obscurant fashion and please God, but I believe that attempting to teach children an obscurant understanding of Christianity will almost certainly lead to their wandering from the faith in due course. I simply have seen it happen too many times.

If children are told that Christianity is a true proposition with apologetic methods, then they can be easily unpersuaded by the apologetics of the world. But *real* faith is never a *proposition*; it is a *relationship*. If your child experiences a relationship with the Savior, especially when that relationship is founded on a long association with the home church practices of their parents, then nothing that pops out of a high school science book, a clay jar in a mid-Eastern desert, or a test tube in a laboratory will be able to shake them. They will understand "Truth" as Jn. 14:6, not as something that is proved by a syllogism or unpacked by deductive reasoning.

## Are Children “Saved”?

Some parents want to rush their children into baptism on the assumption that the children might be eternally lost should something happen to them before they are of a proper age. Baptism, however, should only be for those who can understand the life-long commitment that is involved. But it is important to know that the children are "safe." Here is Prof. Stan Nelson's statement on children:

Children are innocent even though sharing with all humanity the effects of sin. They may sin but they bear no moral or religious responsibility for sin, and they are innocent of understanding. Responsibility comes with rational and moral apprehension. Until by their own attitude they place themselves outside the sheltered sphere, the child is safe within the love that saves.<sup>3</sup>

The biblical basis of this may be found in Rom. 7:7ff. Paul was born "alive." When he became old enough to comprehend the law, he "died." Later he became "alive" again when he accepted Christ.

## Final Remarks

Remember that Jesus always welcomed and loved the children (Mt. 19:13-15). And when children do become old enough to receive baptism, which is their initiation into the community of faith (see Doctrine of Baptism), they should be regarded as "full" members. Remember the "Rule of Paul." **Everyone** should be heard; no one should be silent (1 Cor. 14:26).

May each of your children be so blessed!