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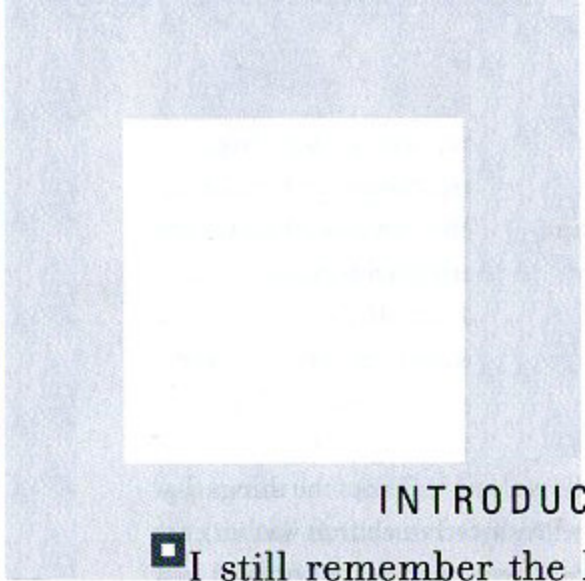
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How Our Children Come to Faith

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INTRODUCTION

■ I still remember the birth of my firstborn as though it were yesterday. Like any other new parents, Sandy and I were overwhelmed with a mixture of joy and responsibility. But as Christian parents, we also had a sense that this child had been given to us by God, and it was our longing and prayer that our son would one day trust his eternal soul to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, just as we had done. I was a fairly new believer with no church background and had never studied theology or church tradition. But I knew that I wanted to publicly give my child to God. I also desired prayer that Sandy and I would be godly parents. I had not completed my education, and we were spending the summer with my mother-in-law. The pastor of the church we were attending welcomed our request, and we dedicated ourselves and our baby to Christ on a Sunday morning before we returned to school.

I continued my studies as well as my personal spiritual pilgrimage, and by the time our second child was born, I was persuaded that baptism was the biblical means of setting apart our children for God. We brought both of our children for baptism in the Presbyterian church we had recently joined. In the years that followed, the Lord gave us two more children,

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whom we also presented for baptism. I say, with gratitude to God, that all four of our children are actively serving Christ along with their Christian spouses. We give God glory for his faithfulness to two young and inexperienced parents.

I'm writing this as a father and grandfather as well as a pastor for over forty years, and I'm glad to contribute to this series of booklets by P&R Publishing called *Basics of the Reformed Faith*. The matter of passing along the faith to our children is certainly one of those basics. One of the things that initially attracted me to the Presbyterian church was its emphasis on thinking in terms of generations rather than just personal faith. I'm writing to parents in a Presbyterian or other Reformed church setting, but I hope this booklet will be helpful to other Christian parents as well. These are truths I wish I had understood as I began the exciting and yet awesome pilgrimage of raising children.

The heart of the matter is that we parents want to instill in our children the desire to follow Jesus, but we are also profoundly aware that we are inadequate to the task. And we are! Therefore, we come to God and ask for his help—which is the very best thing we can do. But in my pastoral experience, too many Christian parents are so focused on their responsibility for their children's spiritual lives that their prayers are essentially, "Lord, help me do *my* job and fulfill *my* calling to raise my children in the faith." They don't stop and listen *first* to what God has told them about *his* commitment to our children. I want to help the parent, grandparent, caregiver, or teacher of children to do this. The realization that our children's salvation is in God's hands is not meant to take away the role that God has given us. Nevertheless, the foundation for what we do for our children is to understand and believe

what God has said about his work for them and in them. As with any other aspect of the Christian life, raising our children in the Lord then becomes what the apostle Paul called "the obedience that comes from faith" (Rom. 1:5).

I am not writing to teach about the baptism of our children. I came to that position from a biblical and theological perspective, and my conviction of its validity has strengthened through the years. Nevertheless, the inward conviction by parents that our children are gifts *from* God and *for* God is not limited to those who practice infant baptism. For those who want to pursue this question further, there are some excellent resources from P&R Publishing.¹ I am also not addressing difficult questions such as the death of children or children who turn away from the faith of their parents.² These are very important, but the purpose of this booklet is to try to explain the usual way in which God works to bring our children to faith.

Furthermore, this is not a booklet about the "how to" of parenting or spiritual nurture. Without question, these subjects are very important and deserve far more attention than I can give in this brief essay. Ample books, seminars, etc., are available to encourage and support Christian parents. Most of what is written and taught is helpful as long as we remember that "surefire" methodologies don't always work. We parents are sinners who have our own struggles and will never be able to "get it right" when it comes to raising children. I have often said that Peter's word, "Love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8), was my salvation as a parent. We tried to make sure that our children were told and shown that they were deeply and unconditionally loved, but beyond that I can't hold up any great secret to raising Christian children.

As a pastor, I have frequently had calls from people I didn't know asking if I would baptize their baby. Even though they weren't members of the church, I invited them to come and talk, explaining that when we baptized a child it also meant that we received them as members of the church and pledged to support the parents in the spiritual nurture of their child. Baptism would be only an empty ceremony without the commitments that go with it. Therefore, we needed to talk first about the parents' commitment to Christ and the church. Most of the time I was given a polite "thank you" and never heard from them again. But on several occasions that call was the starting point of a new walk with Christ. Perhaps you are reading this as a parent who wants to begin providing a spiritual dimension for your family. Even though you have not been actively serving Christ up to this point, God has given you a child, and you know that you need to rethink your priorities now that you are a parent. As you read this booklet to learn about how your children come to faith, consider also what it means for you yourself to be a believer.

BRINGING OUR CHILDREN TO JESUS

Throughout this booklet I refer to "our" children. That is very deliberate. When I speak of "how *our* children come to faith," I am speaking about the children of people who profess to be followers of Jesus. We are those who are sincerely looking to Jesus for our own salvation as well as that of our children. Therefore, the best starting point for considering how those children come to faith is to look to Jesus himself.

Begin by thoughtfully reading and considering this incident recorded in the gospel according to Matthew:

Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there. (Matt. 19:13–15)

There were times when Jesus used children to illustrate childlike faith (Matt. 18:2–6; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17). But in this incident recorded in Matthew 19, it is clear that Jesus is actually speaking about little children. These are children who were brought to Jesus by parents or others who loved them and who desired that Jesus would bless them by placing his hand on them. Jesus was upset that the disciples tried to discourage the parents ("indignant" is the word used by Mark). The disciples were probably thinking that the Messiah had far more important things to do than pay attention to children. But Jesus makes an emphatic statement that these parents were doing the right thing. He said, "Let the little children come to me," and just in case they missed the point he added, "and do not hinder them." He then reached out and placed his hand of blessing on their heads. Mark records that he held them in his arms as he did this.

We could view this simply as a beautiful picture of Jesus loving little children, but a statement from him gives this incident far more significance. As he rebuked the disciples and blessed the children, he added: "for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." *He opened his kingdom to little children.* The way in which Jesus said this leaves room for various interpretations, but at the very least it is