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Biblical and Theological Perspectives: Resources for Raising Children in the Faith

by Marcia Bunge

Our author identifies some fundamental insights from the Bible and the Christian tradition about the roles and responsibilities of parents and the complexity and dignity of children as resources for raising our children in the faith.

As common sense and many recent and innovative programs have shown, one of the most important ways to strengthen the faith formation of children and young people is by engaging and supporting parents or primary caregivers.¹ Practical theologians from a number of denominations are therefore focusing more attention on the importance of spiritual formation in the home.² Institutes and centers devoted to faith formation of children and young people, such as the Youth and Family Institute, offer a number of practical resources "to equip families to pass on faith and live well in Jesus Christ."³ Many conferences and training workshops are devoted to helping pastors and church leaders work more closely with parents and families. Innovative religious educational programs now include more attention to the role of parents and other caring adults in the faith development of children.



All of these theologians, programs, and initiatives recognize that faith formation is a cooperative effort between home and congregation and that faith is not really taught but "caught," especially by speaking more intentionally about faith and carrying out religious practices in the home.

As all of us — parents, grandparents, church leaders, and pastors — seek various ways to raise children in the faith, we

can strengthen our efforts both at home and in our congregations by building upon some of the fundamental insights from the Bible and the Christian tradition about the roles and responsibilities of parents and the complexity and dignity of children. The Bible and our theological tradition contain wisdom that we can critically appropriate for today about adult-child relationships, the tasks of parents, and the strengths and vulnerabilities of children themselves. By taking into account biblically and theologically informed perspectives on children and parents, we will better orient and enrich our approach to faith formation at home and in our congregations — whatever particular religious education curricula or youth and family programs we choose to undertake.

“One of the central ways Lutheran theologians have emphasized the importance of parenting is by speaking of it as a divine calling or vocation.”

This essay provides only a brief sketch of biblically and theologically informed views of children and parents, yet even these few perspectives alone remind us that we can build a strong approach to faith formation only by, at the same time, cultivating vibrant and complex theological understandings of parents, children, and adult-child relationships. Robust theologies of childhood and parenting will also strengthen other areas of our work with or on behalf of children and young people both here and abroad.

Parents

If we take seriously the notion that faith formation must be a cooperative effort between home and congregation, then we can strengthen our approach to faith formation and better engage parents themselves by articulating a robust theological understanding of parents. Although we all certainly honor the work of parents, our language about parents and their role in the lives of a child's faith formation are sometimes weak. We commonly speak of parents as "caregivers" or "providers." Or we say that parents "chose" to have their children. Yet this common language does not reflect the important and sacred role of parents. Mining some of the rich language from the tradition regarding parents and their roles can help strengthen youth and family ministry programs and help parents understand and articulate the depth and importance of their task.

There are many ways that Christian theologians in the past have understood the complex and sacred task of parenting, and they have spoken meaningfully about it.⁴ For example, Horace Bushnell, a leading Congregationalist pastor and scholar of the nineteenth century speaks of the family as a "little church."⁵ Although he sees the important role of the church in the faith development of children, he believes that the primary agent of grace is the family, not the church. "Religion never thoroughly penetrates life," he said, "until it becomes domestic."⁶

One of the central ways that Lutheran theologians have emphasized the importance of parenting is by speaking of it as a divine calling or vocation. Martin Luther reflected deeply on the central tasks and responsibilities of parenting, and he incorporated parenting into his view of vocation or calling as a whole. Although he knew that parenting can be a difficult task and is often considered an insignificant and even distasteful job, he believed parenting is a serious and divine calling. Parenting is one of the particular vocations that serves the neighbor and contributes to the common good.

For Luther, parenting is a calling that is "adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels."⁷ In one often quoted passage, he says the following:

Now you tell me, when a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool — though that father is acting in the spirit just described and in Christian faith — my dear fellow you tell me, which of the two is most keenly ridiculing the other? God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling — not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith.⁸

Luther further underscored the importance of parenting by claiming:

Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.⁹

According to Luther, as priests and bishops to their children, parents have a twofold task: to nurture the faith of their children and to help them develop their gifts to serve others.¹⁰ He also helped parents in this task by preaching about parenting and by writing *The Small Catechism*, which was intended for use in the home.

Followers of Luther also spoke meaningfully about the sacred task of parenting. For example, August Hermann Francke, the eighteenth century German pietist from Halle, claimed that the primary goal of parents is to lead their children to godliness. They are to help children grow in faith, empowering them to use their gifts and talents to love and serve God and the neighbor and to contribute to the common good.¹¹ Formation of children was also emphasized in the recently adopted social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, [*Our Calling in Education*](#).¹²

Children

In addition to building on these and other theological views of parents, any strong approach to faith formation must be integrally connected to a vibrant and complex theological understanding of children and childhood. New scholarship has already brought to light at least four important and almost paradoxical perspectives on children that are helping to build strong Christian theologies of childhood. These perspectives are outlined briefly below, and I have discussed them and others more fully and applied them to a range of questions regarding children in other publications.¹³

Although these perspectives and others are found within the Christian tradition, Christian theologians today and in the past have often viewed them in isolation from one another, resulting in narrow and destructive understandings of children and our obligations to them. Theologians have often focused on one or two such perspectives alone, failing to appreciate the range of Christian perspectives on children and critically retrieving them into a serious and full-blown constructive theology of childhood. Thus, even though the four perspectives outlined below are not exhaustive, they do remind us of the complexity and dignity of children and can help combat simplistic and distorted views of children in the church and in the wider culture. Furthermore, these four perspectives, when held together instead of in isolation, can help guide emerging Christian theologies of childhood and strengthen the church's commitment to children in a range of ministries.

First, and most basically, children are vulnerable beings. They are orphans, "neighbors," and strangers in need of compassion and justice, and therefore parents and other adults are to protect them and provide them with their basic needs. Parents should provide children with their basic needs of food, shelter, love, and affection. When parents are unable to take up this task, or if they have died, then others in the community must help. Numerous

Best Practices

Editor's Note: Marcia Bunge published an article in Dialog: A Journal of Theology entitled "Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Children, Parents, and 'Best Practices' for Faith Formation" (vol. 47, no. 4, Winter 2008, pp. 348-60). Her "Best Practices" section (pp. 354-58) includes a summation based on Scripture and Christian tradition of parental practices and responsibilities for nurturing the moral and spiritual lives of children.

What follows is Ms. Bunge's list. For information regarding how to obtain her full article, go to www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp.

She is currently working on a new book regarding the vocations of both children and parents that will build on these 10 best practices.

1. Reading and discussing the Bible with children
2. Worshipping with a community
3. Introducing children to good examples
4. Participating in service projects and teaching financial responsibility
5. Singing together
6. Cultivating a reverence for creation
7. Education and vocational discernment
8. Giving attitudes toward the body
9. Listening to and learning from children
10. Recognizing the limits of parental authority

biblical passages explicitly command us to help widows and orphans — the most vulnerable in society.¹⁴

The Bible depicts many ways that children suffer and are the victims of war, disease, or injustice. In the New Testament, Jesus also healed, touched, and blessed children. These and other passages clearly show us that all children, like all adults, are our neighbors, and caring for them is part of seeking justice and loving the neighbor.

Second, the Bible depicts children as gifts of God and sources of joy who are fully human and made in the image of God, and therefore parents and other caring adults are to respect them, enjoy them, and be grateful for them. Many passages in the Bible speak of children as gifts of God or signs of God's blessing. For example, Leah, Jacob's first wife, speaks of her sixth son as a dowry, or wedding gift, presented by God (Genesis 30:20). Several biblical passages indicate that parents who receive these precious gifts are being "remembered" by God (Genesis 30:22; 1 Samuel 1:11, 19) and given "good fortune" (Genesis 30:11).¹⁵ Related to this notion that children are gifts and signs of God's blessing, the Bible speaks of them as sources of joy and pleasure. Here, too, there are many examples.¹⁶ Sarah rejoiced at the birth of her son, Isaac (Genesis 21:6-7). In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world" (John 16:20-21).

Children are also made in the image of God and are worthy of human dignity and respect from the start. The basis of this claim is Genesis 1:27, which claims that God made humankind, male and female, in God's image. It follows that children, like adults, possess the fullness of humanity. Regardless of race, gender, or class, they have intrinsic value. Although parents nurture them, they are not made in the image of their parents but in the greater image of God. The sense of the integrity of each person, including children, is also grounded in a view of God who intimately knows the number of "even the hairs of your head" (Matthew 10:30), forms your "inward parts," and "knit[s]" you together in the womb (Psalm 139:13).

A third dimension of the view of children in the Bible and the Christian tradition is that they are also developing beings, sinful creatures, and moral agents in need of instruction and guidance, and therefore parents are to nurture the faith of children and help them use their gifts and talents to love and serve others and contribute to the common good. Parents and other caring adults are to nurture, teach, and guide children, helping them to develop intellectually, morally, emotionally, and spiritually. Several biblical passages speak about these responsibilities. For example, adults are to "train children in the right way" (Proverbs 22:6) and bring up children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). Parents and caring adults are to tell children about God's faithfulness (Isaiah 38:19) and "the glorious deeds of the LORD" (Psalm 78:4b) and to recite God's commands to their children and talk about them "when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:5-9).

Fourth, the Bible also depicts children as models of faith for adults, sources of revelation, and representatives of Jesus, and therefore adults are to listen to children and learn from them. Many Gospel passages turn upside down the common assumption held in Jesus' time and our own: that children are to be seen but not heard and that the primary role of children is to learn from and obey adults. In contrast, the New Testament depicts children in striking and even radical ways as moral witnesses, models of faith for adults, sources or vehicles of revelation, representatives of Jesus, and even paradigms for entering the reign of God. In the Gospels we see Jesus embracing children and rebuking those who would turn them away, healing them, and even lifting them up as models of faith. He identifies himself with children and equates welcoming a little child in his name to welcoming himself and the one who sent him. "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus warns. "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matthew 18:2-5). He adds, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matthew 19:14).

When incorporated into Christian theologies of childhood and held in appropriate balance and tension, these four perspectives have tremendous implications for combating simplistic and destructive conceptions of children and strengthening the commitment to them within Christian communities. For example, when held in tension, these perspectives could strengthen spiritual formation and religious education programs, restructuring them in ways that not only cultivate children's growing moral capacities and responsibilities but also honor their questions and insights. Such programs would recognize the importance of teaching children the faith as well as the role of children in the spiritual maturation of parents and other adults.

Taken together, these four perspectives on children also challenge Christians to renew their commitment to serving

and protecting all children. If the church begins to view all children as made in the image of God, as fully human, and as orphans, neighbors, and strangers in need of compassion and justice, then it would more readily treat all children, regardless of age, race, class, or gender, with more dignity and respect. The church would no longer tolerate or ignore the abuse or harsh treatment of children, including abuse that occurs within the church itself. Furthermore, it would work more diligently to become a stronger and more creative advocate for children in this country and around the world.

Significance

This essay provides only a brief sketch of biblically and theologically informed views of children and parents, yet even these few perspectives alone remind us that one can build a strong approach to faith formation only by, at the same time, cultivating a vibrant and complex theological understanding of children and parents.

For example, on the one hand, if we think of children only or primarily as sinful and disobedient, then our view of parenting will be narrowly defined as punishing and physically disciplining children. On the other hand, if we think of children primarily as models for adults or sources of joy, then our view of parenting will be narrowly understood as learning from and enjoying children, and we will forget the responsibilities of teaching and guiding them.

The Bible and the tradition give us a much richer view of both parents and children. As all of us seek to support the children in our midst and to help raise them in the faith, we can encourage parents by plucking some of the wisdom and language from the tradition regarding the importance of parents and their sacred calling. We can also strengthen our relationships to children themselves by keeping in mind the full humanity of children as well as their need for guidance; their spiritual wisdom as well as growing moral capacities; and their strengths and gifts as well as their vulnerabilities and needs. Resources from the Bible and the tradition regarding parents and children also remind all of us — whether or not we are parents ourselves — the need to work diligently on many levels and in many ways to nurture the faith of children in our midst and, at the same time, to be open to all of the ways that children themselves nourish and strengthen the spiritual formation of adults.

Endnotes

1. This essay builds on sections of the following previously published articles by the author: "Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Children, Parents, and 'Best Practices' for Faith Formation: Resources for Child, Youth, and Family Ministry Today," in *Dialog* 47 (Winter 2008): 348-60; and "The Vocation of Parenting: A Biblically and Theologically Informed Perspective," in *Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework*, ed. Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley (World Vision: 2007): 53-65.
2. See, for example, Merton P. Strommen and Richard Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 2000); Bradley J. Wigger, *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); and Majorie Thompson, *Family, The Forming Center: A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996).
3. The mission of the Youth and Family Institute. See its Web site: www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org.
4. For resources on various ways biblical and theological texts address parenting, see *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge, Terence Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); and *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. by Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).
5. For a full discussion of Bushnell, see "Horace Bushnell's Christian Nurture" by Margaret Bendroth in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 350-64.
6. Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1861; rpt. ed., Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 63.
7. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (LW), eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 45:39.
8. *Ibid.*, LW 45: 40-41.
9. *Ibid.*, LW 45:46.
10. For a full discussion of Luther's views on parenting, see, for example, "The Child in Luther's Theology: 'For What Purpose Do We Older Folks Exist, Other Than to Care for ...

- the Young" by Jane E. Strohl in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 134-59; William Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home: An Application of the Social Ethics of the Reformation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1969); F. V. N. Painter, *Luther on Education* (The Lutheran Publication Society, 1889); and Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning*.
11. See Marcia Bunge, "Education and the Child in Eighteenth-Century German Pietism: Perspectives from the Work of A. H. Francke," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 247-78.
 12. This statement was adopted at the 2007 Churchwide Assembly and can be downloaded for free at the following Web site: www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Education.aspx.
 13. See for example Marcia J. Bunge, "The Dignity and Complexity of Children: Constructing Christian Theologies of Childhood," in *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality*, 53-68; "A More Vibrant Theology of Children," *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (Summer 2003): 11-19; "Retrieving a Biblically Informed View of Children: Implications for Religious Education, a Theology of Childhood, and Social Justice," *Lutheran Education* 139, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 72-87; and "Beyond Children as Agents or Victims: Reexamining Children's Paradoxical Strengths and Vulnerabilities with Resources from Christian Theologies of Childhood and Child Theologies," in *The Given Child: The Religions' Contribution to Children's Citizenship*, eds. Trygve Wyller and Usha S. Nayar (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007): 27-50. For a further discussion of children's own responsibilities and duties, see also Marcia J. Bunge, "The Vocation of the Child: Theological Perspectives on the Particular and Paradoxical Roles and Responsibilities of Children," in *The Vocation of the Child*, ed. Patrick McKinley Brennan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
 14. See, for example, Exodus 22:22-24; Deuteronomy 10:17-18 and 14:28-29.
 15. The psalmist also says children are a "heritage" from the Lord and a "reward" (Psalm 127:3).
 16. Other passages include Jeremiah's recollection that the news of his own birth once made his father, Hilkiyah, "very glad" (Jeremiah 20:15) and the angel's promise to Zechariah and Elizabeth that their child will bring them "joy and gladness" (Luke 1:14).

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For Further Reading

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