



Around the FIRE

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A Theology of Children from a Baptist Perspective JERRY MARCELLINO

The Bible teaches and Baptists have always taught that their children are sinners in need of a Savior. Put another way, Baptists have always unhesitatingly believed that all children are conceived in sin, born in sin, and sin because they are sinners.¹ So, we believe, that apart from the intervening grace of God, all men will one day face an eternity in hell-fire, if they have not been savingly-joined to the Lord Jesus Christ.² This means that even though little children are very cute, it is biblical, and therefore, correct to view every one of them as *little vipers in dirty diapers*.³

Nevertheless, we must still view these little sinners as never-dying souls made in the image of God, who are in dire need of knowing their maker.⁴ Therefore, it is imperative that they regularly hear the gospel, and see it joyfully and consistently lived out from an early age. Such a testimony will be used of God toward

unveiling their sins to them, moving them to repent of them, and causing them to receive both the forgiveness of their sins and eternal life.⁵

“Our children will assuredly outlive us. What kind of message are we sending to a future realm we will never see?”

Despite what many well-meaning evangelicals believe and teach today, there’s no “covenantal protection plan” available in the Bible for those who are born into a believer’s home. In fact, the Bible knows nothing of the “covenant family or child” teaching, but it does explicitly instruct us about the “child of God” standing

before God. This status brings with it a greater accountability because of the great privilege it has of hearing the gospel and of the great proximity it has to the gospel.⁶ Hear the apostle John’s unmistakable words in John 1:12: “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.”

Baptists believe that they are to be stewards of God’s gifts

The Psalmist teaches us that our children are literally gifts to us from the Lord Himself.⁷ This explains why God condemned the people in Jerusalem during Ezekiel’s time for sacrificing their children to idols. In so doing, they had destroyed His own precious possession. Listen to His words (in chapter 16, verses 20-21):



Moreover you took your sons and your daughters, whom you bore to Me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your acts of harlotry a small matter, that you have slain My children and offered them up to them by causing them to pass through the fire?

Don't miss this important truth: *Our children belong to God* and we are the divinely appointed stewards of these souls that will live forever. We will be held responsible for what we do with the children whom God has placed under our care. This means we should use every means that God has given us to reach them with the gospel.⁸

Such efforts will always be accompanied by a sense of spiritual responsibility to perpetuate the faith unto the next generation.⁹ Professor Neil Postman captured beautifully such a perspective when he said, "Children are living messages that we send to a time we will

not see."¹⁰ Our children will assuredly outlive us. What kind of message are we sending to a future realm we will never see?

It is God alone who grants us this stewardship for only a short while with the expectancy that we will be good stewards of these precious little gifts.¹¹ It is our responsibility to raise them within a context of gospel influence so that they might know Christ, and then make Him known, even to the generations yet to be born.¹² Thus, God intends for us to propagate His kingdom, from generation to generation, primarily through godly families.¹³ Such families are those who visibly make it their aim to give Jesus Christ the pre-eminence from daybreak to sundown.¹⁴

Our hearts' desire toward our children ought to be as Paul's was toward the Galatians, whom he addressed as, "My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you."¹⁵ Paul was speaking here about those in the church - those who are regularly under the hearing of the preached Word.¹⁶ We should be like Paul with our own children: exercised to the point of experiencing child labor-like pains until we see Christ formed in them.¹⁷

If Christ is our life, then in every breath that God gives to us we will be seeking to bring Christ home to our children through the examples of our own lives, as well as through the words that proceed from our lips.¹⁸ Such a lifestyle will require that we deny ourselves daily and aim to no longer live only for ourselves, but, to strive to live for the generation to come.¹⁹

Baptists believe that their Children are Placed in their Home by Sovereign Design

We must recognize God's good hand upon our children by virtue of His having placed them into our believing homes. In fact, even if it is an unequally-yoked home

Meet a FIRE Sister Church



Trinity Baptist Church

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Elders: Chris Hough,
Andy Horn, Philip Chandler

“ The Lord Jesus Christ graciously established Trinity Baptist Church on Easter Sunday, March 30, 1997 in Shreveport, Louisiana. He has given us 10 years of peace and unity in the gospel of His grace. We are so thankful for His kindness and sustaining grace.

Our desire in starting Trinity was for the Lord to raise up a church that was gospel-centered, both in worship and church life. A diverse church that is united in the gospel, we want to be a healthy body, nourished by Christ, our living head. In our early years, our congregation consisted mostly of young married couples, but today we are blessed with many different age groups. We have a healthy group of young people who are very zealous for both the gospel and the church—a great encouragement in recent years.

Through our association with FIRE, our vision for world missions has grown and expanded. We are now directly working with three FIRE missionaries, something that has been very healthy for our congregation. Knowing that these missionaries are preaching the gospel of free grace has stimulated both prayer and financial support for them. This brings much joy to our hearts.

Our desire for the future is to labor in the Lord for our church's health and to continue to expand our involvement in world missions. We are very thankful for FIRE and the growing friendships the Lord has given us with like-minded brothers who are laboring for the glory of God.

Grace and peace to you, ”
Chris Hough

in which only one of the parents is a believer, God's blessing is still upon that home. 1 Corinthians 7:12–14 explains:

But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

Your child cannot somehow “catch” salvation by osmosis or through the bloodlines. Rather, he is the recipient of a sanctifying influence from heaven above by virtue of his being placed within the sphere of gospel influence. Therefore, because of God's sovereign grace and His providential design, some children are placed in a home where the gospel is lived and taught, which should give every believing parent good reason to hope that God intends to save them.²⁰ In other words, they should not raise their children in the Lord with a passive and unscriptural presumption that they will one day be saved, but with a pro-active and God-centered Scriptural expectation that God intends to save their children!

Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 7:16, “For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?” That is, if your unbelieving spouse consents to live with you, don't send him or her away—be glad for the opportunity you still have to influence them. And if a believing spouse can influence an unbelieving spouse, then it is certain that a single believing parent can also influence his or her children.

Timothy is a good case in point. Acts 16:1 tells us that he was raised in an unequally-yoked home, having an unbelieving Greek father, and yet, his believing mother and grandmother successfully taught him the Scriptures that were “able to make [him] wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”²¹ Timothy became a powerful minister of the gospel, and was greatly used by God, despite his having an unbelieving father.

Now we must not simply acknowledge God's sovereign orchestration in our homes, but we must also use every God-ordained means to reach our little ones by creating an atmosphere, environment, climate, and culture at home which consistently speaks normally of the reality of God. This is done by seeking in a responsible way to initiate and consistently cultivate the daily worship of God through intercessory prayer, Bible-reading, and by having spiritually-fruitful discussions at other times in the home that end with God: Children should be constantly exposed to godly people and families of all ages, both at home and at their church (for opportunities to observe

and receive godly instruction and engage in spiritually healthy conversation).

Indeed, God commands this ideal. He says in Ecclesiastes 12:1, “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth.” How else is a child going to know his Creator in his youth apart from his parents' daily bringing Christ near to him? God desires for parents to use every available means to reach their children while they are young and when they are tender and most naturally influenced by their parents, especially through their natural affections toward them.

Baptist Churches believe that they are to be the guardians over all children entrusted to their care

Baptist churches have always regarded the children in their midst as a precious stewardship that God has entrusted to them. This is why they have typically viewed such ministries as Sunday school, and other similar discipleship and evangelism-type programs as great opportunities for ministry. They have also always viewed these great opportunities as being their responsibility to further assist their believing parents in both reaching their children for the Savior, and in furthering their maturity in Christ. Children are never viewed in Baptist churches as second-class citizens, but as those who are ripe for harvest, and who are our future members and leaders. I believe the great American Baptist leader of the eighteenth century, Richard Furman, has summed up the historic Baptist position on children, when he said:

But though we contend that infants are not included in membership of the visible church, as children of church members, and have not a right to the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper, ...as such, yet we also argue, that they are placed under guardianship of the church; have a particular claim to their prayers, attention and care; and especially entitled to those ordinances which are designed to be [their] means of conversion.²²

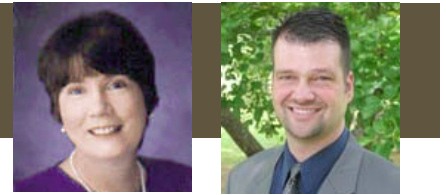


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What is FIRE?

FIRE is a unifying network for independent Reformed (and Reforming) baptistic churches to experience mutual edification, fellowship, cooperation and prayerful support in ministries and missions.



Parenting

Children are a blessing from the Lord, and they bring a lot of joy into any home with their laughter and play. They also bring a lot of responsibility to the parents. Of course, parents are supposed to feed their children, protect them, and keep them clean; but additionally, they have a much more important responsibility. That responsibility is to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

As precious as children naturally are, they are not born loving God and loving others. They are born, however, loving one person dearly – themselves! “Folly is bound in their hearts,” and they are sinners from birth (Proverbs 22:15). What’s a parent to do? The answer is

“bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” each and every day. One way is for mom and dad to model a godly Christian life in front of their children. Otherwise, they will be unnecessarily “provoking their children to anger” (Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21).

The model of your life is only one way to instruct them in the Lord. Other ways are faithful attendance to Sunday School and church, fellowship with other believers, family devotions, and prayer. Parents themselves must learn to think biblically before they can, in turn, instruct their children. For example, parents should teach their child to think in terms of biblical love. “Son, I

want you to sit quietly and wait while I finish cooking dinner. This is a way you can show love to me because the Bible teaches that ‘love is patient’” (1 Corinthians 13:4).

In addition to modeling your life and instructing your child, parents are to discipline their children. The short term goal is for your child to graciously obey the first time you instruct them and while you are speaking in a normal tone of voice. Discipline in love and do not overreact. For the younger child it usually means a spanking; for the older child, a work penalty or restriction. The long term goal is for your child to submit himself to God. Of course, only God can save your child, but meanwhile you can give your child the gospel and pray for his or her salvation.

When giving the gospel to your child, a parent must be aware that merely “asking Jesus into your heart” is not the gospel. Tell your children the truth – God is holy and you are a sinner. Because you are a sinner, you deserve to be punished for your sin. The Lord Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, came to earth and died on the cross for our sins. In other words, he took the punishment that we deserve. The Bible tells us that we cannot save ourselves, but that we can ask God for mercy, and to forgive us, and save us. The Scriptures say, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved ...” (Acts 16:31). Certainly you will want to teach them these things and more. Continue to plant little seeds of truth as you go through life with them.

Parenting is a great joy, and children are a blessing from God. Enjoy your children and work together to “bring

them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

- Are you consistent with discipline?
- Is one or both of you too hard on the children?
- Is one or both of you too lax in your discipline?
- Do you usually agree on the type and severity of the discipline?
- Do both parents take initiative with discipline?
- Do you both talk to the children about the Lord?
- Are you faithful to take the time to instruct the children in the Lord?
- Can you think of some examples where you can do a better job with the children?
- Do you know how to give the gospel to your child?
- What are each child’s strengths and weaknesses?
- What can you do to help your children with their weaknesses?
- What can you do to help your children enhance their strengths?

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Notes

1. Psalm 51:5; Psalm 58:3; Romans 3:10-18; 5:12
2. Matthew 25:41; 1 Corinthians 6:17
3. The late Dr. John Gerstner once reminded my wife Dawn and I of this verity while holding our beautiful baby daughter Cassie in his arms.
4. James 3:9
5. John 3:16
6. Luke 12:48; Ephesians 6:1-4
7. Psalm 127:3
8. 2 Timothy 4:2
9. Psalm 78:1-8; Acts 13:36
10. Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York, NY:

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Your child can understand the principle I've given you. If others in the church begin to see things the same way, it will be even less of a problem to communicate it. The only childhood conversion described in the Bible, Samuel, was between 11 and 15 years of age when he met the Lord (look over the chronology of 1 Samuel 2-3 to arrive at this age period). There is reason both to preach the gospel to our children and to do all that is possible to not be moved to baptize prematurely. There are millions on the rolls of churches—people who thought they became believers as children—who show no signs of spiritual life at all. You do not want your children to have such false assurance. It is not worth it for him or for you. And it is not the business of the church to aid in their deception, but to bring people to the light. There are millions (and I'm conscious of the meaning of that word) on the roles of churches who were baptized as children and yet have no signs of life. May God give you grace to act as carefully as your child's soul deserves.

Favorite Resources:

Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, Pennsylvania: Shepherd Press, 1995).

Elyse Fitzpatrick and Jim Newheiser, *When Good Kids Make Bad Choices* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2005).

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Martha Peace is a biblical counselor and conference speaker; as well as the author of Damsels in Distress: Biblical Solutions for Problems Women Face and The Excellent Wife.

This article has been adapted from "Parenting," a chapter in Tying the Knot Tighter by Martha Peace and John Crotts (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007). Used by permission.

Vintage Books, 1994), p.xi.

11. 1 Corinthians 4:2
12. Psalm 22:30
13. Malachi 2:15
14. Colossians 1:18
15. Galatians 4:19
16. 1 Corinthians 1:21
17. Deuteronomy 6:4-9
18. Colossians 3:4; Psalm 150:6; Matthew 5:16; 1 Corinthians 2:2
19. Luke 9:23; Romans 14:7-9; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Psalm 102:18
20. John 5:34; 2 Peter 3:15
21. 2 Timothy 3:15
22. Richard Furman, *The Children of Church Members* (Laurel, MS: Audubon Press, 1995 [1792]), p.5.

FIRE National Conference 2008

“Defending the Hope: Kingdom Apologetics” (1 Peter 3:15)

May 12-15, 2008

Location: Mt. Hermon Christian Conference Center, Santa Cruz, CA (mounthermon.org)

Speakers: Dr. James Grier (Cornerstone University, Grand Rapids, MI); Dr. James White (A/O Ministries); Jerry Marcellino; Bruce Ray; John Crotts

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us alive . . .” (Ephesians 2:1, 4). That divine conjunction (“But God . . .”) makes all the difference.

So *life* is what you are looking for.

Sometimes life is more noticeable to an experienced believer than to the newly regenerated person himself.

Read this revealing anecdote from the Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s. The writer is Ebenezer Porter, a New England Congregational pastor and first President of Andover Theological Seminary (*Letters on Revival*):

During a powerful revival in Hartford, I called on Rev. Nathan Strong. While he was absent for a little time after my arrival, I fell into conversation with a young lady of his family about the state of religion among the people, and about her own feelings on the subject. Her remarks in respect to her own heart, and the way of salvation, gave me very satisfactory evidence that she had become a subject of renewing grace, though she indulged no hope respecting herself. When Dr. Strong returned from his visits, and spoke of those concerning whom he thought there were hopeful evidence of saving change, he mentioned this young lady in his own house as one of the number, though she saw no ground of hope in her own experience. I told him that I had conversed with her, and did not at all regret this want of self-confidence, for I had often found it to be among the best evidences of genuine conversion.

“A father and his son,” said I, “were digging a well. The son had descended into it to prosecute the work, when the sides of the well caved in, and covered him with timbers and rubbish. The father, after a moment of agony, cried out, ‘My son, are you alive? My son, are you alive?’ ‘No, sir,’ was the answer from beneath. It was enough; it was evidence of life which the father desired.”

“Now,” said Mr. Hallock to me, “during my experience in revivals, I have often found that a man who is but recently born of the Spirit, would often say, ‘No, Sir,’ should you ask him if he is converted. And yet I may have much better evidence of his real change than I have of another, who has an early and confident hope.”

The parents of the interested child should move the emphasis off the externals mentioned earlier—praying a “sinner’s” prayer (that is not even found in the Bible), walking an aisle, talking to the pastor, raising a hand, signing a card—to a look at life.

When your five year old child comes home from a children’s meeting with a card in his hand saying that he has “prayed the prayer” of salvation and been converted, what are you

Reading our Children Is There Somebody Alive in There? JIM ELLIFF

I have tried to say with as much clarity as possible, and often, that the assurance a person has that he or she is actually a Christian does not have to do with praying a prescribed prayer, being affirmed by a Christian leader, walking an aisle, signing a card or raising a hand, but whether that person has *life from God*.

An unregenerate person does not have this life, even if he is religious. A child who is unregenerate, for instance, one who has attended church, memorizes verses of Scripture, participates in his Sunday class, and knows his Christian music, is just as spiritually dead as Osama bin Laden. In fact, he is as dead as a corpse.

But God can make your child—and Osama bin Laden—alive. After Paul describes the nature of believers *before* they were converted with some gross detail, beginning with the fact that they were once “dead in trespasses and sins,” he then turns the discussion on its head by saying: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, *made*

going to do? If you have always emphasized that coming to Christ means that you “pray the sinner’s prayer, and that once a person prays a prayer to receive Jesus he will be saved because God does not lie,” then you are in a very difficult position. Now that he has prayed this prayer, how are you supposed to lead him?

If you persist in holding to your idea that praying a prayer, or some other external and additional (usually manmade) accoutrement to faith is the pivotal act that makes a Christian, then you have to accept his experience as inviolable. But if you are a more biblical thinker, you will not at all believe that doing such a thing invariably makes your child a Christian. With genuine respect for any movement and interest your child has shown toward God, you will nonetheless bring him to this reality: “When God saves a person, he makes him alive from the dead. When God makes you a true Christian you will see signs of this life that will increase until you can be sure that you are alive.”

What are these signs of life? First, there is the sign of repenting and believing itself. The dead boy or girl now trusts Christ as his or her only hope for heaven. There is no mixture of trust in self or works or religion, but only in Christ and what He has done and will do.

Second, there is a new valuing of the Scriptures. I cannot say this clearly enough. If I am to know you, I will know you principally by your words as you express yourself and communicate your thoughts. God’s Word is His principal communication of Himself. But it is more than just the words themselves that is important in this change. It is the Spirit working in the words that gives understanding and that “knowing” of Christ. Christ said, “It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me” (John 6:45). This is granted—and not to all (Matthew 13:11).

Third, there is obedience from the heart. All kids may be taught to obey like Pavlov’s dogs. If there is enough discipline and incentive, any child can straighten up. And, it is right for parents to expect this obedience even from unconverted children. Yet, when a child is made alive there is a new sensitivity to sin and a new and higher motivation and inner compulsion to obey. You will see obedience from the heart as if the child were newly constituted. In fact, he is. I am not saying that he will be perfect, any more than you are. But something has taken place on the inside that is unmistakable.

My children have all asked the same question: “Dad, how can I know if I am a Christian?” I answered them all just as I answered the first.

“Suppose we went to the seed store to buy some flower seeds. We intended to grow a chrysanthemum. So we put the seed into the ground. That seed looks like a mum seed, but we know that it could look like the seed of a lot of other flowers as well. Some time later a little green shoot comes up. It looks right, but we are not sure if it is a mum. It could be a weed, for all we know. More time passes and the green stalk bears some leaves. These look just like mum leaves, but they could be leaves of some other flower. Then the bud comes out. We have more assurance. But when the flower blooms, then we know for sure. In the same way we will watch your life and see if we can tell what God is doing. If you have the life of God, you will bloom in such a way that you will one day be very satisfied that you are a true Christian and will have no need to doubt. Often this is most clear when you are a teenager and make the choices between your friends and Christ. Your job is to seek Christ, to trust and follow Him.”

It is the job of the church to baptize every true convert as “an outward symbol of an inward reality” and we must do that as soon as possible. But we must emphasize in the case of children and really every professing believer that it is valid converts we baptize, not just anyone who says he has believed. We find that knowing this is more difficult with children because they cannot express themselves as an adult would and because their experiences in life have not as clearly demonstrated that they have life from God. But we still cannot baptize those we only hope are Christians. So we must wait until we know, and then we will baptize as immediately as possible.

We are not saying to our child that we know he is a believer but he has to wait to be baptized, but that we are waiting to see that there is true fruit so that he will not be deceived, and then we will baptize as soon as possible. Again, children are in some ways a different category in that they are less able to demonstrate that they are true Christians. We all know that it is easier for children to be deceived than adults. Yet, if they happen to face difficulties, such as serious illness, or other trials of faith, they may express life as obviously as anyone possibly could (1 Peter 1: 5-7). So, there is no law about what age life manifests itself. For many children, however, it may take some time to be sure. And they can be brought to appreciate this in many cases. You cannot “unsave” them if they are already belong to Christ.

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About FIRE

FIRE seeks to assist local churches in projects and activities such as:

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- short-term missions projects
- church planting
- caring for the needs of the poor
- publishing books, pamphlets, tapes and educational materials
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