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FOREWORD

Essays in the previous issue of the Faculty Bulletin focused on the Christian moral vision and the identity of the early church as a moral community. It was argued that faithful lives commended Christianity to many in the ancient world.

In T. R. Glover's phrase, however, the early Christians not only "out-lived and out-died" their pagan opponents; they also "out-thought" them. From the outset the church was involved in teaching and interpreting the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. Thus the church was not only a moral community; it was also a teaching community--and its teaching anchored its morality.

In the emerging "therapeutic society" it is vital that the church resist the temptation to become "relevant" and "practical" to the neglect of the task of instructing believers in basic Christian beliefs. The following essays reflect upon various aspects of the church as a teaching community.

Once again, appreciation is owed to Mrs. Nancy Tindel, Faculty Secretary, for her work in preparing the manuscripts.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

By James W. Thompson

The observer of artistic works from ancient or medieval times is likely to be surprised at the way in which children are portrayed. The child is regularly represented as a little adult. In ancient Egyptian art, the children appear as miniature adults. In medieval portrayals of Jesus' request that children be allowed to come to him, the artist depicts a group gathered around Jesus who are little in stature, but who have none of the features associated with childhood. Children are regularly represented as having the same bodily structure and features as adults.¹

Philippe Aries, in Centuries of Childhood, has suggested that these artistic works reflect the place of the child in ancient and medieval society.² He suggests too that "in the realm of life, and not simply in that of aesthetic transposition, childhood was a period of transposition which passed quickly and which was just as quickly forgotten."³ It has been only in the modern era, according to Aries, that childhood has been "discovered." Indeed it might be argued that a future generation could look at our

memorabilia and conclude that we are a child-centered society. Moreover, such disciplines as child psychology and education indicate our interest in the development of the child. Unlike a previous society which largely ignored the child, our society has made the child the object of special attention in many different ways.

The special attention to the needs of the child has had an impact on the church. Christian educators have learned from specialists in child development in order to produce an educational environment suitable for the special needs of children. In the past two decades, churches have focused their energies on youth ministries because of a recognition that adolescents have needs that call for special attention. Few of these ministries existed a century ago. Indeed, many of them were extremely rare a generation ago. They reflect the church's own discovery of the child.

Modern sensitivities frequently provide questions which lead us back to the practice of the early church in search of answers. Thus our sensitivity to the needs of the child leads us to ask what guidance the New Testament offers about the place of children in the church. Does the New Testament offer guidance on the training of children and adolescents? Can we ascertain how the faith was communicated to the younger generation? In this article I shall examine the New Testament texts in an attempt to derive some in-sights from the early church on these questions.

A Problem for the Early Church

While the New Testament does not speak in detail about the place of children in the church, there are indications that the early church was faced with a problem in dealing with the place of the child in the community. This problem is suggested in a scene recorded in the Book of Acts when Paul returned to Jerusalem with the news from his missionary labors. Paul recognized, according to Romans, that the visit would be both dangerous to him and critical for his mission. The record of this visit which is preserved in Acts indicates that his fears were well grounded. While Paul finds many Jewish Christians who rejoice at the successful reports from his mission, he meets others who greet his report with suspicion and misgiving. In Acts 21 Paul is told about the concern which his labors have evoked. "And they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe their customs." Among the issues raised by the Pauline mission was the question of the status of children in the community.

While the reports about the place of children which were circulating among Jewish Christians in Jerusalem may not reflect Paul's teachings precisely,⁴ they do suggest that practical questions were being raised which challenged time-honored Jewish practices. The missionary practice, unlike that of an established religious community, was directed at the incorporation of adults into the people of God. The message, with its appeal to repentance and baptism, was presented to adults.⁵ One could

conclude that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith envisions only adults. The absence of any comments about the place of children in the community is particularly striking in light of the fact that the new situation in Christ called for Paul to make pronouncements on the social roles of others in the community. The missionary situation required Paul to comment on the place of women and slaves. These reflections on the status of women and slaves makes the absence of any comments about children especially striking. We can thus understand the reaction of Jewish opponents who could ask, "What is the place of children in these communities?"

The scene in the Synoptic Gospels where children are brought to Jesus (Matt. 19:13-15; Mk. 10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-17) may also reflect the fact that this community was faced with a problem over "receiving children." The fact that this single incident was remembered and handed on in the early church indicates that Christian communities were faced with a new kind of problem. The words of Jesus were recalled to provide guidelines for the place of children in the church.

Children in the Jewish Tradition

Those who raised the question about the place of children in the missionary churches had inherited a tradition in which the ways for incorporating the child into the community were firmly established. The circumcision of the male child initiated him into the covenant people.⁶ The ceremony dedicating a newborn child to the Lord

suggests the importance of the child to the community.⁷ God's mandate to Israel can be seen in Malachi's complaint about the frequency of divorce. "What does he desire?" asks the prophet. The answer is, "Godly offspring" (Mal. 2:15). The family was the fundamental unit in Israelite society where "godly offspring" were formed.

Our records leave no indication that children were the objects of special attention or that educational programs were designed particularly for the youth. "Godly offspring" were shaped in families and at the public festivals where children had been brought by their parents. Elementary and secondary schools for children apparently were developed no earlier than 100 B.C.⁸ Instruction was passed on by fathers in the family unit, and not in special schools. Joshua 4:2 anticipates the time when children will ask their fathers, "What do these stones mean?" The common refrain running through Deuteronomy is, "And you shall teach them to your children" (6:6; 11:18; cf. 4:10). The Israelites are told in Exodus 13:8, "You shall tell your son on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.'" "The home was, therefore, Israel's educational institution where the faith was communicated.

As Israel's major educational institution, families recognized that the faith was communicated only in connection with the life of Israel. The child grew into the faith, not by receiving lectures, but by absorbing it through his presence at special festivals.⁹ As in the story of Jesus at the age of twelve (Lk. 2:41-51), parents brought their children

to the sacred festivals. According to Deuteronomy 31:12, “men, women and little ones” were to be assembled for the reading of the Torah.¹⁰ At the Passover celebration, the youngest child asked, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” Then the father recited the story of the exodus (Pes. 10:4). The child thus learned his place in the community by hearing the story retold in the various festivals. He thus “absorbed” the story in the context of the family and public worship. He was never taught the tradition in special lectures; he grew into it organically.¹¹

Israel’s concern with the child’s absorption of the faith is indicated by rabbinic discussions about the obligations of the child to keep the Torah. It was only at puberty that a young man became a “son of the covenant”—bar mitzvah.¹² Before the child reached the age of keeping the commandments, he was gradually prepared for that day.¹³ In Jerusalem, a boy who could take his father’s hand or ride on his shoulders was obligated to keep the festivals.¹⁴ According to one rabbinic statement, small children were not expected to fast on the day of Atonement. However, the child was to become accustomed to the traditional fast two years before he was obligated to keep it.¹⁵ Several rabbinic traditions rigidly prescribed the stages in the child’s learning. According to Aboth (“The Sayings of the Fathers”) 5:21, the child began with Scripture at age five; took up Mishnah at age ten; at age fifteen he learned Talmud.¹⁶ Another tradition suggested that a child’s education began as soon as he could speak.¹⁷

While children were educated to become full members of the community, they were not regarded as full members of the community until the age of puberty. Consequently, children are often listed among those who are religiously inferior. The minor was not included in the minyan, the required number necessary for a synagogue service.¹⁸ Women, slaves, and minors comprise a special category of those who were not full members of the community.¹⁹ They were exempt, therefore, from the responsibilities of adult, full members. According to one tradition, “Women, slaves, and minors were exempt from wearing phylacteries, but they were not exempt from saying the Tefillah, from the law of the Mezuzah or from saying the Benediction after meals.”²⁰ According to another tradition, women, slaves and minors could not serve as witnesses.²¹ While the child was being trained for the day when he was a full member of the community; the minor belonged to a special category. A firm line distinguished those who were sons of the covenant from those who were not.

The religiously inferior status of the child probably accounts for some of the negative comments among the rabbis. It was considered a waste of time, for example, to spend time in conversation with a child. According to one rabbi, “Morning sleep and midday wine and conversation with children and sitting in the houses of the ignorant people put a man out of the world.”²² Another rabbi said, “Since the day the temple was destroyed prophecy has been taken from the prophets and given to fools and children.”²³

The Old Testament and rabbinic statements about the training of children in the Jewish tradition indicate that the education of the child was taken seriously. The faith was passed on from one generation to another by dedicated fathers who determined that “godly offspring” were shaped in families. The texts say nothing about secular education. The goal of the entire educational process was to prepare the children for the day when they would assume the obligation of keeping the Torah.

Children in the Early Church

When we turn to the Pauline letters, the modern reader is apt to be amazed at the paucity of references to children. In most instances where he refers to the nepios or the teknon, he uses these words for the child in a metaphorical sense.²⁴ His “beloved children” include the Corinthian and Galatian churches (1 Cor. 4:14; 2 Cor. 12:14; Gal. 4:19) and his co-worker, Timothy. The term nepios is used metaphorically for immaturity in the faith (1 Cor. 3:1; 13:11). The goal of the Christian life is to be “no longer children” (Eph. 4:14). Thus Paul’s references to childhood shed little light upon his view of children in the church, as Paul appears to be more concerned with the metaphorical child than with the actual child.

If we are to learn more about the place of children in the early church, we must observe the social characteristics of the early Christian mission. The household had a special importance in the life of the early church. The Christian mission often resulted

in the conversion of entire households (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15, 19). The house then became the meeting place of the early church (Philem. 2; Col. 4:15) and the “basic cell” of the Christian movement.²⁵ Thus the new community was superimposed upon an existing network of relationships.²⁶ The New Testament refers to the existing relationships of husband-wife, slave-freeman, and parent and child. While significantly more appears to be said about the relationships of husband-wife and slave-master, we may assume that children were present in these households. Indeed, there are scattered references to the place of children in these communities. On Paul’s final journey to Jerusalem, for example, the Book of Acts recalls a scene where Paul and his companions departed from Tyre.

And when our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey; and they all, with wives and children, brought us on our way till we were outside the city; and kneeling down on the beach we prayed and bade one another farewell (Acts 21:5).

The scene in the gospels where children are brought to Jesus is a further indication that the early church looked back to Jesus for guidance in determining the place of children. The children, according to all accounts (Matt. 19:13; Mk. 10:13; Lk. 15) are brought to Jesus. The word for “child” in Matthew and Mark (paidion) means “very young child.”²⁷ In Luke’s gospel they are described as infants (brephe). Thus the children envisioned are those who, in traditional Jewish custom, have not yet reached the age of the bar mitzvah. The fact that they are “brought” suggests their helplessness.

This passage is often recalled for its encouragement to the disciples to “become like children.” However, in Matthew’s version of the story, the emphasis is not on “becoming like children.” Jesus’ words, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven,” focuses on real children. As surely as the others were invited to come to Jesus (cf. Matt. 11:28), children were invited. They were among the many “little people” who, though despised by the world, were invited to come to Jesus.²⁸ Jesus’ words, “For to such belongs the kingdom,” refers not to childlike disciples, but to children. Whereas children were not officially counted in the synagogue until the bar mitzvah, Jesus gives them a place in his kingdom. In the same way that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor and the helpless (Lk. 6:20), it belongs to children.

Children in the Pauline Churches

We have few indications from Paul as to how the early church put Jesus’ words into practice. We catch a glimpse only when Paul mentions children in the context of other discussions. In 1 Corinthians 7:14, for example, children are mentioned in a context where the subject is mixed marriage. The Christian mission has separated families, leaving Christians bewildered about their relationship to their spouses and children. Apparently they ask how they could live in God’s new age and remain in the household with unbelievers. Would they become defiled by the spouse and the child,

who do not live in the new age? Paul answers, “For the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy” (1 Cor. 7:14). Thus a Christian does not have to leave unbelieving spouses and children, for they are all “made holy” by the believer.

Paul introduces a concept of holiness which appears nowhere else in his writings. Both children and spouses are “made holy” when, in fact, they have not become Christians. In fact, Paul offers the hope that the unbelieving spouse will be saved by the partner (1 Cor. 7:16). Paul is apparently using the expression “made holy” to mean something like, “brought under the influence.” He anticipated that unbelieving spouses would be exposed to the Christian faith and later be saved. In the same way, children would be influenced by the wider circle of the Christian community. Christian teaching would have its impact on them.

Perhaps the religious training of Timothy indicates, at least partially, the way in which Christian teaching was passed on, even in a mixed marriage. Because Timothy’s father was Greek (Acts 16:1), he was not educated in the faith by his father. Nevertheless, he was not lacking in religious training. Timothy, according to 2 Timothy 3:15, had known the sacred writings “from childhood” (apo brephos). The expression rendered “from childhood in the RSV is literally, “from infancy.” The knowledge of the sacred writings is apparently equivalent to the faith which first dwelled in his mother

and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5). Instruction and faith were, therefore, communicated within the family. No mention is made of the role of outside institutions. Even where the father was not a believer, the home was the place where children learned the faith. Thus Timothy, like generations before him, simply absorbed the faith by constant exposure to it.

Fathers and the Faith

In the advice to households recorded in Ephesians (5:21--6:9) and Colossians (3:18--4:1), we discover the impact which Christianity made where families were not divided. In this advice to households, we see the results of the conversions of entire households, for all three groups of the ancient household are addressed: husband-wife, parent-child, and slave-master. The fact that each individual is addressed is a reminder that Christians were to remain “where they were called” (1 Cor. 7:17), and to use their status in God’s service. Significantly, even the individuals in the “inferior” roles are addressed.²⁹ Both they and the “superior” parties have duties “in the Lord,” for their roles have all been transformed “in the Lord.”

It is especially significant that children are actually addressed in the household codes. Although teknon can refer to adult children, the context of the appeal in the household suggests that they are minors. The address to children suggests that they have a place in the assembly and in the life of the church. Their place is reminiscent of the

place of children at Jewish festivals. They have a place in the community, and they hear words which are addressed to them.

Both household codes remind fathers, in a way characteristic of Jewish literature, that they have responsibilities to their children. Although children have a place in the community, the task of instruction rests with fathers. In the early church, there is no record of educational institutions established by the church for the sake of children.³⁰ The church provided training programs for new converts, but not for children.³¹

The home was apparently the place where the faith was communicated from one generation to the next. Although it is uncertain whether “believing children” designates adult children or minors, the particular qualification stipulates that the Christian leader must already have demonstrated his leadership and faithfulness in his own home. The home, then, as a fundamental unit of the church, was an important place for communicating the faith.

In 1 Timothy 3:5, a specific parallel is made between the leader’s capacity to care for the home and his leadership of the church. Children were to be educated into the faith by Christian parents.

Lessons from the Early Church

The status of children in the early church may suggest at first that they were, as in ancient art works, little noticed and largely ignored. The early church neither made the

children the special objects of attention nor understood them as a special group. There is no “year of the child” and no special program for them. Instead, they were simply there in the life of the church. We do not know when and how they were judged to be suitable candidates for baptism. But we do know that they learned the faith through the interaction of home and church. Apparently little children were present in the assemblies, and they absorbed the faith. They were then taught the faith by devoted parents,

As a part of our general concern with the problems of passing on the faith to children, we share our culture’s discovery of the child. Thus we do not hesitate to initiate ministries designed to educate our children in the “discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Our experiments with children’s worship, family life ministries, and youth ministries indicate our concern for the task. While many of these ministries will be helpful, none of them will substitute for one aspect of the early church’s education of children: the interaction of home and church. The faith was communicated in the intimate circle of the family. Children recognized that more than information was being passed on. It was a faith which was taught at home, a faith which the parents themselves had made their own. I am convinced that, with our emphasis on programs to teach children and adolescents, we have not often grasped the significance of parents who communicate their own faith. Because something is needed besides the communication of information, those who live in the intimate circle of the family are likely to be the

best teachers and evangelists.

We can also learn from the early church's inclusion of children in worship and in the life of the community. Children were present when the community recited its story of faith and when the word was preached. There is, as John Westerhoff has shown, opportunity for the congregation to communicate its faith at the regular worship.³² The story, as it is told in music, prayer, the Lord's Supper and preaching, will be absorbed by children who learn the faith as they hear it recited and participate in the church's life. The love for others in the community and the discipline of the Christian life will be experienced before they are understood.³³

Conclusion

While we have benefited greatly from our culture's increased understanding of child development, it would be inappropriate to derive our models for the Christian education of the child exclusively from secular education. While the New Testament only rarely addresses the subject of Christian education of children, it nevertheless offers insights which should be helpful for the contemporary church. The continuity between the family and the church provided children with a suitable environment for learning the faith. Any changes in training children which diminishes this continuity are likely to lose something vital in the training of the child. The new challenge of the church today is to equip parents to communicate the faith to their children.

Notes

- ¹ Philippe Aries, Centuries of Childhood (New York: Vintage, 1962) 33. Cf.
- ² Aries, chapter 2, passim.
- ³ Aries, 34.
- ⁴ There is no indication that Paul discouraged Jews from circumcising their children (cf. Acts 16:1).
- ⁵ G. Haufe, "Das Kind im Neuen Testament," TLZ 104 (1979) 625.
- ⁶ J. P. Hyatt, "Circumcision," IDB, I, 630. Cf. J. Jeremias, TDNT, V, 647.
- ⁷ Cf. Ex. 13:2.
- ⁸ See H. R. Weber, Jesus and the Children (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979) 41.
- ⁹ W. Jentsch, Urchristliches Erziehungsdenken (Gutersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1951) 11.
- ¹⁰ Jentsch, 96; Weber, 40.
- ¹¹ Jentsch, 110.
- ¹² Jeremias, 647.
- ¹³ Jeremias, 647.
- ¹⁴ See H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch (Munich: Beck, 1961) II, 145.
- ¹⁵ Strack-Billerbeck, II, 144.

- ¹⁶ Cf. Aboth 4:20.
- ¹⁷ Sif. Deut. 46; Suk. 42a. Cited in C. Roth, Encyclopedia Judaica, I, 428. Henceforth cited as EJ.
- ¹⁸ EJ, 428.
- ¹⁹ James Crouch, The Origin of the Colossian Haustafel, FRLANT (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Reprecht, 1972) 104. In enumerations, children appear together with women. Cf. Matthew 14:21.
- ²⁰ Ber. 3:3.
- ²¹ Baba Kamma 88a.
- ²² Aboth 3:11.
- ²³ BB 126.
- ²⁴ Cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-3; Gal. 3:23--4:6. Cited in Haufe, 631.
- ²⁵ Wayne Meeks, The First Urban Christians (New Haven: Yale, 1982) 75.
- ²⁶ Meeks, 76.
- ²⁷ W. Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957) 539.
- ²⁸ Weber, 18; J. Sauer, "Der ursprünglicher 'Sitz im Leben' von Mk 10:13-16," ZNW (1981) 41. The language, with its description of those who are "brought" to Jesus and "touched," closely resembles a healing story.
- ²⁹ J. H. Yoder, The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 171.
- ³⁰ W. Barclay, Educational Ideals in the Ancient World (London: Collins, 1959) 236.
- ³¹ Barclay, 236.

³² John Westerhoff, Will Our Children Have Faith? (New York: Seabury, 1976) 56.

³³ Westerhoff, 92.

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