

CHILDREN IN THE CHURCH

The church is people, and that includes children! But what place do they have in the church? Here we explore some of the issues faced by parents and ministers, leaders and members alike.

A child – Yours, yet not yours

A child – A gift from God

A child – Entrusted to you for a while on his/her journey of life and of faith, growing towards God, as creator and redeemer.

‘EACH CHILD IS SPECIAL, ACCEPTED AND LOVED’

Let’s look at what the Bible says about children:

In the Old Testament, children are a sign of God’s blessing (Ps 127:3-5). Sons inherited the covenant and obeyed the laws (Gen 17:19; 2 Kgs 22:2). Daughters observed the faith within the family and were mothers to the next generation (Prov 1:8; Ruth 4:11). Parents taught their children the great stories of God’s saving love for his people (Ex 13:8; Deut 6:6-7) and prepared them for the responsibilities of their adult religious life.

Occasionally, a child was called by God to some special task (1 Sam 3; Jer 1:5), showing that even the young could know him.

And that gives us a link with Jesus. He valued children because he knew that God loved them and had a special place for them in his kingdom. He went out of his way to heal them and bless them (Mark 5:41-42; 10:13-16). Yet he wasn’t sentimental about them. He remembered how tiresome they could be (Matt 11:16f).

Jesus cared because:

- They were weak and defenceless, in need of protection (Matt 18:5f).
- They were trusting by nature and simply accepted everything offered to them. God wanted all his disciples to be like that: to let him love them freely and generously and to receive him into their lives unconditionally. Children taught the meaning of true discipleship (Luke 18:17).

How often we, too, need to be reminded of this lesson!

In the rest of the New Testament, there is very little about children and their place in the early church. That is why there are differences of practice between Baptists and other denominations. There is no evidence that infants were baptised and joined the church. This was reserved for those who heard the gospel and responded to it as believers, the position which Baptists hold today.

THE CHILD’S POSITION

We believe that children are born into the world for which Christ lived, died and rose again so they live within the scope of his saving work and under his grace. As they experience Christian life and worship they are receiving the nurture that will, we pray, lead them to make their own confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and become full members of his church.

MARKING THE BIRTH

Baptists hold a service called ‘Infant Presentation’, although you may find other titles used. Based on our Biblical understanding, we express in the service what we believe about God’s care and purpose for children, and responsibilities of parents and the church.

For the child – We give thanks to God for his/her birth, asking his blessing as Jesus blessed the children;

For parents – We ask God for his grace to help you as you dedicate yourselves to Christian parenthood;

As a church – We promise to help you in the nurture of your child, through prayer, pastoral care and practical support.

This service usually takes place near the beginning of regular Sunday morning worship. The exact order and wording will be decided by the minister who will talk it through with you. Suggestions are offered in 'Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship', but variations may be made to suit your own circumstances.

The minister will welcome you and your child, your family and friends. He/she will explain the purpose of the service, then read some Bible passages.

Those most widely used are:

Deut 6:4-7, in which Israelites were commanded to pass on to children their own love for God;

Mark 10:13-16, where Jesus blessed the children;

Matt 18:3-4, which reminds us that children teach us how to be true disciples.

A prayer of thanks for the gift of your child is offered to God the creator of all life. You will then be invited to stand to express your own thankfulness and your Christian commitment to your child. The minister will ask you simple questions to which you respond, "We do". If you have other children they should be included in some way at this special moment.

Some parents ask close family members and friends to stand with them to indicate their special support and interest in the child's Christian upbringing. If you choose to do this the minister may add appropriate sentences.

The formal naming of the child may take place here. It has no legal significance, but comes from another Biblical insight. In the scriptures, names given to people describe their personality and sometimes their calling. Each person has a unique identity, on earth and in heaven. The naming affirms the promise. 'I have called you by name, you are mine' (Is 43:1).

The minister will take your child in his/her arms and show him/her to the congregation. Sometimes the children of the church may be invited to come and greet the baby; they will be the baby's first friends in the church.

The congregation will be asked to stand as they promise to support you and to walk with you in Christian faith.

The minister will then bless the child, using the words of Numbers 6:24-26:

'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.'

In this blessing the love of God is touching the life of the child. It is a sign of God's care channelled through the family and community.

Your child is handed back to you, a final prayer is offered and a certificate or a Bible is presented. During or after a hymn, which you may have been invited to choose, your child can be 'shown off' to the congregation – a proud moment! If a crèche is provided, the child could be cared for during the remainder of the service.

Be assured of the church's sensitivity to your situation. You may be a single parent; the child may be adopted; he/she may be disabled in some way; or you as parents, while wanting to express gratitude to God for your baby, may not yet feel ready to undertake the full commitment asked of you. The church will continue to offer you its loving support.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The home is the first place where children will learn of God. This will happen in ways you don't expect.

By cuddling, listening, talking and playing with your child you are laying secure foundations for them to love and trust God. By praying together as a happy and natural part of daily living they will begin to know God as a friend. By sharing the joy of Easter and Christmas at home, they will know themselves to be part of God's on-going story. By worshipping together at church, they will feel they belong to a larger family of faith.

If you doubt your ability to be a good parent, remember that God entrusted his son to a very ordinary man and his inexperienced wife.

WILL MY CHILD HAVE FAITH?

Only God knows the answer to that.

At birth children start out on their own journey of faith. You must give them the freedom to travel, but pray for them all the way. At first, they will share your faith. Then they will learn about the faith of other Christians in their church community. Next, they will begin to ask questions and to experiment with new ideas. They may appear to rebel, but this is part of healthy spiritual growth. Later on (and they could be adults by now), they may respond to the gospel, claim faith as their own and confess it openly in the waters of baptism. They will do this in their own time. Parents are like 'the bows from which the children as living arrows are sent forth'. You build the foundations and provide the impetus. Trust to God for the rest.

HOW WILL THE CHURCH HELP?

- By teaching
- By relating
- By travelling

Let's look at these in turn.

Teaching

Most churches teach children in classes separated into different age bands, usually after a shared time of worship with adults on a Sunday morning. A syllabus published by a national organisation is often used (for example, National Christian Education Council's 'Partners in Learning' or Scripture Union's 'Learning All Together'). These also contain adult material, so all may learn about the same Bible passages in different groups. Indeed, in some churches, this is taken one stage further and all ages learn together.

Relating

A church community is rather like an extended family, with older and younger members, some married, others single, sharing life and worship together. In this family, people of all ages can enjoy social events, develop skills, and build relationships. Children should be included wherever possible. Within this 'family' life, they receive an important part of their nurturing, getting to know how others live their faith day by day. Remember the saying: 'Faith is caught, not taught.'

Travelling

A church is more than a family or place of learning: it is about something deeper.

‘Every day, we’re on our way, for we’re a travelling, wandering race, we’re the people of God.’

That’s a sound Biblical picture of a pilgrim people, adults and children alike, bound together on a journey of faith towards one goal. Each can learn from the other of whatever age; by our common experiences of God in worship and in life we can all grow deeper in faith. Children can often open doors of understanding for us. Together we walk the pilgrim road, each person receiving and contributing regardless of age.

To think about: Are children in your church ‘in the way’?

WHAT ELSE MIGHT A CHURCH PROVIDE?

Besides Sunday worship and learning, some churches offer other activities, for example: Midweek clubs, Uniformed organisations, Playgroup, Parents’ and children’s groups, Youth club, Holiday or after school clubs.

Churches can only offer these activities if there are enough leaders. Perhaps as their children grow up parents may feel called to help too. Many different training courses are available if they haven’t done this kind of work before.

To think about: All the emphasis seems to be on the children. Parents often need help. How is this done by the church? Could we do more?

WILL MY CHILD BE SAFE AT CHURCH?

Recent legislation tries to make sure that all children being looked after by adults are safe, physically and morally. The 1989 Children Act applies to churches only if long-term activities are run. However, it is wise to take care in the upkeep of property and in the selection and supervision of all those involved in children’s work. Parents should regularly ask ‘what?’, ‘how?’ and ‘who?’ They have the right to be confident that their children are safe.

To think and to do: Is the church building ‘children-friendly’? Try going round it at child height, on your knees. Can you reach handles and tables; did you get splinters? What did it feel like?

A FINAL THOUGHT

‘Roots and wings, that’s what we can give our children – roots and wings!’

Anne Dunkley

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