

Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Children, Parents, and 'Best Practices' for Faith Formation: Resources for Child, Youth, and Family Ministry Today

By Marcia J. Bunge

Abstract: One of the most important ways to strengthen the faith formation of children and young people, and child, youth, and family ministries is by engaging and supporting parents or primary caregivers. This article seeks to address this challenge by mining resources from the Bible and Christian theology about the roles and responsibilities of parents, the complexity and dignity of children, and ways to pass on the faith. By taking into account theological perspectives on parents, children, and faith formation, church leaders can better engage both children and parents, and they can strengthen all areas of their work with or on behalf of children and young people, whether in children's ministry, youth and family ministry, religious education, or child advocacy.

Key Terms: parents, children, theology of childhood, faith formation

The Current State of Things

Although the church certainly cares about children and young people, and offers a number of programs to serve them, there are many signs of the urgent need to strengthen child, youth, and family ministries. The difficulties are well-documented, well-known, and wide-spread. Programs for children and youth are often underfunded, and leaders for them are difficult to recruit and retain. The curricula of many religious education programs are often theologically weak. Even in excellent programs, some children come only sporadically. Pastors and

church leaders struggle to develop and maintain strong and meaningful confirmation programs, and many young people who do affirm their baptism do not return to church after confirmation. Although some later return as members of a church when they themselves have children, overall, membership in many mainline churches continues to decline. Furthermore, as recent studies have shown, and the experience of many parents, pastors, and lay leaders confirm, even young people who attend church regularly and are confessing Christians know very little about their faith traditions, and have difficulty perceiving or articulating the relation between faith and their daily lives.¹

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As many recent and innovative programs have shown, one of the most important ways to strengthen the faith formation of children and young people, and also child, youth, and family ministries, is by engaging and supporting parents or primary care-givers. Practical theologians from a number of denominations therefore are 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 faith development of children. The importance of parents in the faith formation of children is also often highly emphasized among growing evangelical and non-denominational churches today. All of these theologians, programs, and initiatives recognize that faith is not really taught but ‘caught,’ especially by speaking about faith and carrying out religious practices in the home.

Lack of Faith Formation in the Home

Despite the recognition of the powerful role of parents and other primary care-givers in the faith formation of children and young people, many congregations still fail to emphasize the importance of parents in their children, youth, and family ministry programs. Religious education programs often operate in isolation from the home, not as an extension of the home. Many parents do not know what their children are learning in Sunday school or confirmation, let alone participate in intergenerational or family religious education programs; and parents also are not given the sense that they are primarily responsible for the faith formation for

children. Programs for youth rarely include parents; and when they do, it is more to ‘inform’ parents about youth activities than to engage parents in meaningful conversations with their children about faith or service activities. As a result, we find that many parents within the church are neglecting to speak to their children about their moral and spiritual matters or about their beliefs and values; and they are not carrying out central religious practices that nurture faith with their children in their homes. One study of 8,000 adolescents whose parents were members of congregations in eleven different Protestant and Catholic denominations found, for example, that only 10% of these families discussed faith with any degree of regularity, and in 43% of the families, faith was never discussed.⁴

Even those congregations that do emphasize the importance of parents and care-givers in their children, youth, and family ministry programs find this not an easy task for many reasons. Single-parent and even two-parent families are broken and struggling in various ways. Many children even with two parents live in poverty. Even economically sound families struggle with the ‘time bind.’ They must work longer hours for less pay, and they have little time to see their children. Children themselves are often in a time bind, juggling their energies among school, family, friends, and extra-curricular activities. Furthermore, regardless of their familial structure or economic status, parents can be self-centered and uninvolved in the lives of their children. In addition, some parents in two-parent families come from different religious traditions or have little or no religious upbringing, and either are unable to pass on the faith to their children or feel ill-equipped to do so. Other children have only one parent because of death, divorce, war, neglect, or abuse. These single parents often live in poverty, and must take on two jobs to support their children. There are also many children who have no parents at all, or parents who cannot care for them. The number of child-headed households and children being raised by grandparents is rising here and all around the world. Other children are awaiting adoption in foster care homes or orphanages.

Faith Formation as a Cooperative Effort

Despite and amidst these and other enormous challenges, as parents, youth leaders, and pastors think about the future of child, youth, and family ministry, it is imperative that they include parents and primary care-givers in their programs, and emphasize that faith formation is a cooperative effort between home and congregation. They must continue to find ways to engage and support parents so that faith formation is part of everyday life and practice. Supporting parents is also important because the family has the most potential of any institution for providing for children's basic needs and for shaping their spiritual and moral lives.⁵ Clearly, children are shaped by their genetic make-up and influenced by their peers, neighborhoods, schools, religious communities, and wider political and social contexts. Each of these influences plays a role in shaping a child's character. Nevertheless, parents or primary care-givers often are still the most important shaping force (whether negative or positive) in a child's development.

As congregations and church-wide offices continue to find practical ways to incorporate and engage parents and care-givers in child, youth, and family ministries, they can fruitfully build on and incorporate some of the wisdom within the biblical and theological tradition about parents, children, and faith formation. Until recently, this wisdom was largely untapped because contemporary theologians and ethicists, regardless of tradition, offered little, if any, serious theological reflection on children and parents. They focused significant attention on albeit related issues, such as abortion, human sexuality, gender relations, contraception, marriage, and reproductive technology, yet little on fundamental subjects regarding children themselves, such as: the nature and status of children; parental obligations to children; and the moral and spiritual formation of children.⁶ Contemporary theologians and ethicists have tended to consider such issues as 'beneath' the work of serious scholars and theologians, and as a fitting area of inquiry only for

pastoral counselors and religious educators. Thus, theological discourse in many Christian traditions has been dominated by simplistic and ambivalent views of children and teenagers that diminish their complexity and integrity, fostering narrow understandings of parenting and other adult-child relationships.

Theologies of Childhood and Child Theologies

This is beginning to change, however, with the rapid growth of childhood studies in the academy overall, and with the development of both 'theologies of childhood' and 'child theologies.'⁷ This distinction is just emerging among Christian theologians and ethicists who are concerned about children. 'Theologies of childhood,' on the one hand, aim to provide theological understandings of children and childhood and our obligations to children themselves. 'Child theologies,' on the other hand, reexamine not only conceptions of children and obligations to them but also fundamental doctrines and practices of the church. Drawing on analogies to feminist, black, and liberation theologies, child theologies have as their task not only to strengthen the commitment to and understanding of a group that often has been voiceless, marginalized, or oppressed—children—but also to reinterpret Christian theology and practice as a whole in the light of attention to children. Theologians and practitioners who are helping to strengthen both theologies of childhood and child theologies⁸ are building upon and critically mining resources from the Bible, their own theological traditions, as well as the insights from the burgeoning interdisciplinary area of 'childhood studies.'

The aim of this paper is to highlight some of the theological insights that are being mined from the Bible and the Christian tradition about parents, children, and 'best practices' for faith formation. As church leaders attempt to integrate parents more fully into their child, youth, and family ministry programs, and as they discern the best approaches

to take in their own particular congregations and communities, they all will benefit by critically incorporating some of the fundamental insights from the Bible and the Christian tradition about the roles and responsibilities of parents, the complexity and dignity of children, and ways to pass on the faith. By taking into account theological perspectives on parents, children, and faith formation, church leaders can better engage both children and parents, and they can strengthen all areas of their work with or on behalf of children, whether in children's ministry, youth and family ministry, religious education, or child advocacy.

Part One: Theological and Biblically Informed Perspectives on Parents and Children

Any strong Christian vision of children, youth, and family ministry must be supported by a robust theological understanding of parents and adult-child relationships.⁹ Although churches certainly honor the work of parents, language about parents and their role in the lives of a child's faith formation is sometimes weak. We commonly speak of parents as 'care-givers' 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.

For example, John Chrysostom spoke about the family as a little church or a 'sacred community.' For him, this means that parents should read the Bible to their children, pray with them, and be good examples. Being a little church also means that the family reaches out to the poor and needy in the community. Chrysostom ranks the neglect of

children among the greatest evils and injustices. For him, neglect of children includes inordinate concern for your own needs and affairs above those of your children. He also believes that we neglect children when we focus on secular standards of success, which at that time, as today, means mainly financial success; or when we are preoccupied with accumulating possessions. In our own time, shaped globally by a consumerist culture and market-mentality, Chrysostom's words seem very contemporary.

Like Chrysostom, Horace Bushnell, a leading Congregationalist pastor and scholar of the 19th century, also speaks of the family as a "little church."¹⁰ 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."¹¹ His popular book, *Christian Nurture*, envisions spiritual formation as a natural process that takes place not merely by reading the Bible and teaching children aspects of the faith, but rather through everyday practices and routines and the examples of adults. Thus, he stresses the heroic importance of "small things" and claims that "it requires less piety . . . to be a martyr for Christ than it does to . . . maintain a perfect and guileless integrity in the common transactions of life."¹²

Another way 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 could be a difficult task and was 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 him, parenting is a calling that is "adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels."¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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. August Herman Francke, the 18th 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.¹⁷

Amidst their recommendations for parenting, Luther and his followers recognized an important paradox. They believed that faith comes through God’s grace and God’s activity. They were not as certain as some theologians that good parenting and a proper upbringing results in faith. Nevertheless, by providing very specific guidelines about the goals and task of parenting, they believed that nurturing faith in children is an urgent task, and that faith results largely from the diligent work of parents.¹⁸

Four Theological Perspectives on Children

Any strong Christian vision of parenting or adult-child relationships also must be integrally connected to a vibrant and complex theological understanding of children and childhood. New scholarship already has brought to light at least four important 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.¹⁹ They are also echoed in some of the excellent Christian theologies of childhood now being written.²⁰

Although these perspectives and others are found within the Christian tradition, Christian theologians today and in the past often have viewed them in isolation from one another, resulting in narrow and destructive understandings of children and our obligations to them. Theologians often have focused on one or two such perspectives alone, failing to appreciate the range of Christian perspectives on children, and resisting 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 theologians of the complexity and dignity of children, and can help combat simplistic and distorted views of children in Christian communities of faith 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 they need parents and other adults 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 biblical passages explicitly command us to help widows and orphans—the most vulnerable in society.²¹ The Bible depicts many ways that children suffer and are the victims of war, disease, or injustice. In the New Testament, Jesus also healed 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 (Gen 30:20). Several biblical passages indicate that parents who receive these precious gifts are being “remembered” by God (Gen 30:22; 1 Sam 1:11, 19) and given “good fortune” (Gen 30:11). To be “fruitful”—have many children—is to receive God’s blessing. The Psalmist says children are a “heritage” from the Lord and a “reward” (Ps 127:3).

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. Sarah rejoiced at the birth of her son, Isaac (Gen 21:6–7). Even in his terror and anguish, Jeremiah recalls the story that news of his own birth once made his father, Hilkiyah, “very glad” (Jer 20:15). An angel promises Zechariah and Elizabeth that their child will bring them “joy and gladness” (Lk 1:14). 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” (Jn 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” (Mt 10:30), forms your “inward parts,” and “knit” you together in the womb (Ps 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” (Prov 22:6) and bring up children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). Parents and caring adults are to tell children about God’s faithfulness (Isa 38:19) and “the glorious deeds of the Lord” (Ps 78:4b). They are to teach children the words of the law (Deutt 11:18–19; 31:12–13), the love of God with the whole heart (Deutt 6:5), and doing what is right, just, and fair (Gen 18:19; Prov 2:9).

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: children are to be seen but not heard; and 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” (Mt 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” (Mt 19:14).

The perspectives on children found in the Gospels continue to be as striking today as they were in Jesus’ time. In the first century, children occupied a low position in society, child abandonment was not a crime, and children were not put forward as models for adults. Even today, we rarely emphasize what adults can learn from children.

However, as followers of Christ, Christian parents have a responsibility to listen to children and to learn from them. They should take their questions and concerns seriously. They also are to pay attention to the lessons that children can teach them. Viewing children as models for adults or vehicles of revelation does not mean that they are creatures who are ‘near angels,’ ‘closer to God,’ or ‘more spiritual’ than adults. However, these passages and others do challenge parents and other caring adults to be receptive to the lessons and wisdom that children offer them, to honor children’s questions and insights, and to recognize that children can positively influence the community and the moral and spiritual lives of adults.

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 will more readily treat all children, regardless of age, race, class, or gender, with more dignity and respect. The church will no longer tolerate or ignore the abuse or harsh treatment of children, including abuse that occurs within the church itself. Furthermore, it will work more diligently to become a stronger and more creative advocate for children in this country and around the world.

This article provides only a brief sketch of a few biblically and theologically informed views of children and parents, yet even these few perspectives remind us that one can build a strong view of parenting and adult-child relationships only by cultivating a vibrant and complex theological understanding of children and childhood. 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.

Part Two: ‘Best Practices’ for Nurturing the Moral and Spiritual Lives Of Children

If parents have a responsibility to help nurture the moral and spiritual lives of children, then how do they best carry it out? And if children are models of faith and fully human but also vulnerable and in need of teaching and guidance, then what activities and practices are important in their faith formation?

The Bible and various Christian traditions also emphasize what we might call ten “best practices” and responsibilities of parents for nurturing the moral and spiritual lives of children. Attending to these ten practices and responsibilities is not a guarantee that children will “turn out OK” and be faithful, service-oriented, and compassionate adults. Christians generally agree that despite any child’s upbringing (whether good or bad), children continually surprise us, and God is at work in their lives regardless. However, Christians from various traditions have used these ten particular duties and practices to foster the moral and spiritual formation in children. Recent sociological and psychological studies on moral or spiritual development also confirm the value of these kinds of activities for children and young people today. These are ten valuable ways of creating a space for the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of children and adults. Although perhaps the first four are most familiar and most emphasized in the Christian tradition,²² all ten have been important in the tradition for cultivating faith and service to others.

Reading and Discussing the Bible with Children

Chrysostom, Luther, John Calvin, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Bushnell and many other Christian theologians have emphasized the importance of reading and discussing the Bible with children. Regardless of their view of biblical authority or biblical interpretation, so-called conservative and liberal Protestant Christians today all agree that the Bible is the central text for the Christian church, and contains truths and stories that parents or caring adults need to tell and to teach children. Adults will read different Bible stories to children in different ways, but no matter what their approach, they should cultivate in children the practice of “religious reading”—reading and re-reading the texts, “digesting” them, and viewing the Bible as a vast and abundant gold mine of wisdom that can never be fully excavated.²³

Praying and Worshipping

Theologians also have emphasized that parents should worship regularly with their children. They should “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy,” and participate in corporate worship. Rituals of worship and prayer at home are also important. Many theologians have emphasized praying daily with children, and have written special prayers that can be said before and after meals and at bedtime. They also have carried out particular rituals and family traditions during seasons of the liturgical year, such as Lent and Advent.

Introducing Children to Good Examples

Christian theologians have recognized the importance of good examples in the lives of children. In general, being a good example means that parents or care-givers are believers themselves and strive to live out their faith in their everyday lives. Other important examples for children are teachers, coaches, and other adults who have cared for children and taken an interest in them.

Participating in Service Projects and Teaching Financial Responsibility

Christian theologians also have encouraged parents to serve others in the community with their children and to reach out to those in need. The family is not understood as an isolated, self-satisfied, or enclosed entity; it is not a fortress but rather a community that reaches out to those in need. Parents and other caring adults teach children much about their faith and values when they find ways to help the poor or to carry out service projects together with children. The value of this kind of mutual service was underscored in a survey that found that “involvement in service proved to be a better predictor of faith maturity than participation in Sunday School, Bible study, or worship services.”²⁴

Because service is related to financial responsibility, and because we do live in a consumer culture, it is important for parents to speak to their children about money and financial responsibility. In the United States today, we now have more shopping malls than schools, the favorite activity of 95% of high school girls is shopping, and the number one reason that students must drop out of college is credit card debt. Parents must realize that financial responsibility goes along with service to and love of others: knowing how to spend money wisely and to use it to help others.

Singing Together

The arts, especially music, have always been an important vehicle of moral and spiritual formation in the Protestant tradition. Martin Luther, for example, believed that music was not simply an ornament for worship service but rather a vital element of human existence, an instrument of the Holy Spirit, and a powerful vehicle for spreading the gospel. He emphasizes the value of music in these bold words, "Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise."²⁵ Because of the vital role of music and the arts in spiritual life, he specifically encourages Christians to sing with children and to train them in music and the arts. For example, in one passage Luther claims, "I would like to see all the arts, especially music, used in the service of Him who gave and made them. I therefore pray that every pious Christian would be pleased with this [the use of music in the service of the gospel] and lend his help if God has given him like or greater gifts. As it is, the world is too lax and indifferent about teaching and training the young for us to abet this trend."²⁶

Cultivating a Reverence for Creation

There are many examples within the Christian tradition of how close contact with the natural world has been a source of spiritual growth and inspiration. Many biblical passages emphasize the beauty and goodness of creation and the importance of go-

ing to the wilderness for spiritual renewal, cleansing, or insight. Early in the Christian tradition, monks retreated to the wilderness to meditate and wrote eloquently about the insights they gained about God's creation and their place in it. The important relationship between the spiritual life and the natural world is also found in the works of Celtic Christians, medieval mystics, St. Francis, and many contemporary Christian writers today, such as Leonardo Boff or Wendell Berry. Many young Christians today attend Bible camps or wilderness retreats, and such experiences not only help cultivate a love of others but also a love and respect for the natural world.

Education and Vocational Discernment

Many Protestant theologians, such as Luther and Francke, would add that we nurture faith in children by helping them discern their gifts and talents, and by providing them with a good liberal arts education so that they can better use their gifts to love and to serve others. Both believe a strong liberal arts program will help children develop their God-given gifts and talents, enabling them to serve both Church and society.²⁷ Parents and caring adults are to help children find their vocation: not just by helping them see what is fulfilling or earns the most money, but how they can best use their talents to make a difference in the world and to contribute to the common good. In a letter to the councilmen, Luther underscores the importance of education by saying:

Now the welfare of a city does not consist solely in accumulating vast treasure, building mighty walls and magnificent buildings and producing a goodly supply of guns and armor. Indeed, where such things are plentiful, and reckless fools get control of them, it is so much the worse and the city suffers even greater loss. A city's best and greatest welfare, safety, and strength consist rather in its having many able, learned, wise, honorable, and well-educated citizens.²⁸

Given their views of education and vocation, both Luther in the 16th century and Francke in

the 18th, in contrast to many in their time, were advocates of excellent schools and education for all children (including girls and the poor). They promoted real educational reforms that continue to influence German schools today. As Luther stated, "We must spare no diligence, time, or cost in teaching and educating our children" to serve God and the world.²⁹ In the Jewish tradition, too, one of the major responsibilities of parents is to provide their children with an education that prepares them for a trade or a profession. Thus, many theologians and religious leaders in both the Jewish and Christian traditions have started or supported schools and colleges, fought for educational reform, and demanded that all children be given an excellent education.³⁰

Fostering Life-Giving Attitudes toward the Body, Sexuality, and Marriage

Although the Christian tradition has a somewhat ambivalent legacy regarding the body, the Jewish and Christian traditions both affirm the goodness of our bodies and our sexuality, and the goodness of the natural world in general. Because of this conviction, and because young people and even very young children today are bombarded with messages about sex in the media, parents and other caring adults therefore should help children understand from an early age that taking care of their bodies is part of honoring God and God's gifts to us. They also should help children understand the proper context for the expression of sexuality and speak to them about Christian understandings and expectations of marriage and sexual activity.

Christian theologians in the past also have typically encouraged parents to do more to help young people think about and find a mate. Luther considered this to be one of the central duties of parents. Jews today also consider this to be one of the primary duties of parents.³¹ Today, theologians do not tend to speak about this as a parental duty, since they want children to choose their own partners. But helping children find a partner is not the same as promoting forced marriages. It is simply saying that just as we 'make sure' our children have good

friends or a good education or music lessons, we need to 'make sure' we talk to them about sex and marriage, help them learn from both our mistakes and positive experiences in relationships, introduce them to potential partners, and ensure that when and if they become engaged, they take advantage of strong premarital programs offered in the church today.

Listening to and Learning from Children

Adults also cultivate faith in children by listening to their questions, insights, and concerns. Parents should recognize that children also can nurture, deepen, and challenge the faith of adults. As noted above, this notion is built on the Gospel passages that depict children as moral witnesses, models of faith for adults, sources or vehicles of revelation, and representatives of Jesus. The idea that children can be teachers, bearers of revelation, or models of faith has often been neglected in Christian thought and practice. However, throughout the tradition and today, we do find theologians who have grappled seriously with these New Testament passages, forcing them to rethink their assumptions about children and exploring what adults learn from them. For example, Friederich Schleiermacher emphasized that adults who want to enter the kingdom of God need to recover a childlike spirit. For him, this childlike spirit has many components that we can learn from children, such as 'living fully in the present moment,' being able to forgive others, or being flexible.³²

Recognizing the Limits of Parental Authority

Another part of a parent's role is taking up a Christ-centered approach to discipline and parental authority. Although some Protestants today equate 'disciplining children' with physically punishing them, true discipline has much more to do with becoming followers and disciples of Christ.

Furthermore, although most Protestants claim that parents have authority over children, they also

recognize that this authority is never absolute. It is always limited. Theologians generally qualify absolute parental authority because they recognize parents are always sinful, and sometimes unjust or just plain inept. They also recognize that as children grow and develop, their moral capacities and responsibilities also grow and develop, and children must be prepared to challenge the authority of their parents and even political and ecclesiastical authorities if they lead to injustices. Thus, parents are given authority over their children, but this authority is limited, and it is never an excuse for treating children unjustly or unkindly.

Although Luther, for example, compared the authority of parents to God's own authority, he gave examples of the abuse of parental authority. Building on Scripture, he believed that even though children should generally tolerate the injustices of their parents and obey them, they could under certain circumstances and in good conscience act contrary to the will of tyrannical or unjust parents.³³ He believed, for example, that parents should neither force nor hinder the marriage of their children and asserted:

Parental authority is strictly limited; it does not extend to the point where it can wreak damage and destruction to the child, especially to its soul. If then a father forces his children into a marriage without love, he oversteps and exceeds his authority. He ceases to be a father and becomes a tyrant who uses his authority not for building up—which is why God gave it to him—but for destroying. He is taking authority into his own hands without God, indeed, against God. The same principle holds good when a father hinders his child's marriage, or lets the child go ahead on his own, without any intention of helping him in the matter.³⁴

These ten are not the only important practices; there are others. However, this list of ten can serve as a guide for church leaders and parents themselves as they seek to nurture faith in their children. In addition, although children best thrive when these and other 'best practices' are carried out in the home by two loving parents within the covenant of marriage, in a fallen world, this cannot always

happen. Nurturing the faith of children is and must be a cooperative task, and these kinds of practices can and should be carried out not only by parents in the home but also by relatives, friends, mentors, godparents, grandparents, and church leaders in formal and informal settings.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted just a few of the resources that could be mined from the Bible and the tradition for strengthening child, youth, and family ministries today. As pastors and church leaders evaluate programs and seek to engage children and parents, they can encourage parents by plumbing some of the wisdom and language from the tradition regarding the importance of parents and their sacred calling. Regardless of the youth and family program they decide to use in their congregations, they also can strengthen that program 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. Furthermore, they can encourage practices in the home and in the congregation that nourish faith, and they can remind all members of their congregations that all of us, whether or not we are parents ourselves, 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 the all of the ways that children themselves nourish and strengthen the spiritual formation of adults.

Endnotes

1. As the recent study by Christian Smith has found, a vast number of teenagers, including those who identify themselves as Christians and are affiliated with a Christian denomination, are "remarkably inarticulate and befuddled about religion," and they have "a difficult to impossible time explaining what they believe, what it means, and what the implications of their beliefs are for their lives." See Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religions and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27 and 262. See

also 32, 218, 260. Smith's project is called the National Study of Youth and Religion, and its website is: youthandreligion.org. Smith and his researchers conclude that what they call a vague "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" appears to be displacing the substantive traditional faith commitments of most historical U. S. religious traditions. *Soul Searching*, 262.

2. See, for example, Merton P. Strommen and Richard Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Winona: St. Mary's Press, 2000); Wendy M. Wright, *Seasons of a Family's Life: Cultivating the Contemplative Spirit at Home* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Bradley J. Wigger, *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Marjorie Thompson, *Family, The Forming Center: A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1996); Diana R. Garland, *Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families: Living the Faith in Daily Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "Heard and Seen: The Challenge of Religious Formation in Families," in *Concilium*, no. 4 (2002): 45–54; and Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

3. The mission of the Youth and Family Institute. See its website: youthandfamilyinstitute.org.

4. 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), 14.

5. Merton Strommen, founder of both the Search Institute and the Youth and Family Institute, claims that the family is still "the most powerful institution in promoting faith in children and youth." He admits that children are influenced by their family, congregation, community and culture. Each level of influence makes a significant impact, positive or negative, in shaping the characteristics of children. He believes, however, that the "primary force in the life of a person is the family." Thus, families, not the church, must be seen as the backbone of spiritual and moral formation of children. Merton Strommen, "A Family's Faith, A Child's Faith" in *Dialog* (Summer 1998):177–178. See also Don Browning, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin. *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 308.

6. As Todd Whitmore has argued, "For the most part, church teaching simply admonishes the parents to educate their children in the faith and for children to obey their parents." See Todd David Whitmore (with Tobias Winright), "Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching," in *The Challenge of Global Stewardship: Roman Catholic Responses*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Todd David Whitmore (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 161–85.

7. For a fuller discussion of current trends, see Marcia J. Bunge, "The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood," the *Journal of Religion* 86.4 (October 2006), 549–579.

8. Studies in the areas of ethics, systematic theology, historical theology, and practical theology that are helping to shape and to strengthen both "theologies of childhood" and "child theologies" include, for example, Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Johnson, *Regarding Children* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1991); Marcia J. Bunge, ed. *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Pamela Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000); Marva Dawn, *Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Dawn DeVries, "Toward a Theology of Childhood," *Interpretation* 55, no. 2 (April 2001); Kristin Herzog, *Children and Our Global Future: Theological and Social Challenges* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Timothy P. Jackson, ed., *The Morality Of Adoption: Social-psychological, Theological, and Legal Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability:*

A Theology of Childhood (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005); Kathleen Marshall and Paul Parvis, *Honouring Children: The Human Rights of the Child in Christian Perspective* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 2004); Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell, *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005); Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Jürgen Moltmann, "Child and Childhood as Metaphors of Hope," *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (2000), 592–603; Deuseddit R.K. Nkurunziza, "African Theology of Childhood in Relation to Child Labour," in *African Ecclesial Review* 46, no. 2 (2004), 121–138; Merton P. Strommen and Richard Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Winona: St. Mary's Press, 2000); Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); and John Wall, "Childhood Studies, Hermeneutics, and Theological Ethics," the *Journal of Religion* 86.4 (October 2006).

9. Parts One and Two of this article build on sections of the following previously published article: Marcia J. Bunge, "The Vocation of Parenting: A Biblically and Theologically Informed Perspective," in *Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework*, edited by Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley (World Vision: 2007): 53–65. 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 *Vocation of the Child*, edited by Patrick McKinley Brennan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

10. For a full discussion of Bushnell, see "Horace Bushnell's Christian Nurture" by Margaret Bendroth in *The Child in Christian Thought*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 350–364.

11. Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1861; rpt. Ed., Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 63.

12. "Living to God in Small Things" in *Sermons for the New Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), 291–292.

13. LW 45:39.

14. LW 45: 40–41.

15. LW 45:46.

16. 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*, 134–159; 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*.

17. 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*, 247–278.

18. As Gerald Strauss concludes and as Strohl confirms: "Only in formal theology was a sharp and final distinction made between human effort and divine grace." In practice, Luther and his followers believed that mature faith and good citizenship are fostered in young people largely through religious education and the diligent work of adults. *Luther's House of Learning*, 39.

19. 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*, edited by Trygve Wyller and Usha S. Nayar (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007): 27–50.

20. Bonnie Miller-McLemore, for example, emphasizes children must be “fully respected as persons, valued as gifts, and viewed as agents.” Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, xxiii. Building primarily on the gospels and the work of Frederick Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Dawn DeVries criticizes an instrumental view of childhood, stressing that children have intrinsic worth and both rights and responsibilities that correspond to that worth. Dawn DeVries, “Toward a Theology of Childhood,” *Interpretation* 55, no. 2 (April 2001): 161–162.

21. See, for example, Exodus 22:22–24, Deuteronomy 10:17–18; and 14:28–29.

22. The first four practices are most familiar and have been emphasized by several institutes that focus on faith formation in children, such as the Search Institute and the Youth and Family Institute.

23. Here we can learn from the contemporary thinker, Paul Griffiths, who makes a distinction between “religious reading” (which is done slowly, repeatedly, and with the aim of gaining wisdom for life from the text) and “consumerist reading” (which is done quickly and with the aim of getting information). See Paul Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

24. Merton P. Strommen and Richard Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*, 95.

25. Forward to Georg Rhau’s *Symphoniae iuconudae* in LW 53:323.

26. “Preface to the Wittenberg Hymnal” (1524) in LW 53:316.

27. For Luther’s ideas on education, see, for example, his “Sermon on Keeping Children in School” (1530) and his “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” (1524). For Francke’s view of education, see Bunge, “Education and the Child in Eighteenth-Century German Pietism.”

28. Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 712–713.

29. “The Large Catechism,” 388.

30. For a contemporary Lutheran statement on faith formation and schooling, see the ELCA’s recently adopted social statement, “Our Calling in Education.”

31. Elliot N. Dorff, *Love Your Neighbor and Yourself: A Jewish Approach to Modern Personal Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003).

32. For an excellent discussion of Schleiermacher, see Dawn DeVries, “Be Converted and Become as Little Children: Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Religious Significance of Childhood,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 300–328; and Dawn DeVries, “Toward a Theology of Childhood,” 165–166.

33. Martin Luther, “That Parents Should Neither Compel nor Hinder the Marriage of Their Children, and that Children Should Not Become Engaged Without Their Parents’ Consent,” LW 45: 385–393.

34. LW 45:386.