

Biblical Parenting – 2 Teaching and Shaping

Ephesians 6:4: God's Basic Commands to Parents

Bring them up ...

bring them up (The verb is a present/continual, active imperative)

Parenting is *active*:

Seven reasons children need parents who are spiritual tutors:

- 1) Children are sinners.
 - *The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth.* (Gen 8:21)
 - *The wicked are estranged from the womb; these who speak lies go astray from birth.* (Ps 58:3)
 - *I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.* (Ps 51:5)

- 2) Their thinking is inherently foolish (Prov 22:15).

Children do not know what is best for them to eat, when to go to bed, where they should sleep, or what to wear.

- 3) They do not have the skill of discerning the consequences of their behaviour (Gal 6:7).

- 4) They tend to love ignorance rather than knowledge and wisdom (Prov 1:22).

- 5) They incline toward spiritual laziness (Prov 6:6-11).

- 6) They tend to trust self rather than God (Prov 3:5-6).

- 7) The gospel is not intuitive knowledge—it needs to be taught (Matt 28:18-20).

), but they don't know about Christ and His death and resurrection in their place.

The mental aspect of bringing up:

in the discipline and instruction of the Lord

- *discipline/training (paideia):*

The educational process of raising and teaching a child: *Instruction with teeth in it*. It is instruction that bites if you don't pay attention.

- *instruction/admonition (nouthesia)*:

To place something in the mind, to exert influence over a child's thinking.

The affective aspect of bringing up:

Parents are more than information stations or feeding troughs. They are supposed to create an entire environment, in which the child absorbs a particular view of reality.

In other words, a child is no *tabula rasa (blank slate)*. He arrives with a set of faculties that immediately begin to make sense of the world by interpreting the raw data of the world through an ever-growing 'grid' of interpretations, sensibilities and dispositions. No fact he encounters is understood on its own; it is understood through a network of other facts, feelings and desires. He does not store "neutral facts" like a computer. He builds up a large set of loves and hates, likes or dislikes. He is not "processing" the world like a lifeless computer. He is "interpreting, judging, evaluating" the world.

Before the child is able to even completely comprehend the ideas explain the gospel, he already has prejudices for or against the claims of Christ. He either has a disposition, a *sensibility* that Christianity is true and good and beautiful and ought to be embraced, or he does not. As he grows, this sense increases or decreases in either direction, and largely shapes how he interprets the facts of Christianity as they are placed before him.

Another term for this grid is the *imagination*. How a person imagines reality in totality, how he pictures ultimate things that make sense of the raw data of his life, how he places value on things and orders them, is his imagination. This imagination can either be Christian or non-Christian. It can be religious or secular. And it is shaped long before the child can read or answer catechism questions.

It's my belief that many of the evangelical dropouts we witness today are abandoning the faith because they grew up with a fundamentally secular imagination, with a thin Christian overlay. Over time, or as a result of some life circumstance, the underlying grid pushes the person to re-evaluate his beliefs and align them more consistently with the grid. Since the grid is essentially one that views God as a weightless, if not non-existent concern, at some point the thoughtful person recognises that his Christian faith is a wrinkle in his worldview, an error in the program, an extraneous digit that does not belong. Consequently, he announces that he "no longer believes".

Many Christian parents have embraced the secular idea of a human being as a fact-collector when it comes to educating their children. Theirs is identical to a secularist's approach, except that to the list of algebra facts, economics facts and art facts, they add Bible facts. They believe that they must simply supplement the secular information with some Christian information, and all will turn out well. Years later, their children, now young adults, announce that they no longer believe what they were taught in Sunday School. What happened? Did the Bible facts change in their content?

What happened is that the child's *interpretation* of those Bible facts changed. His *feeling* towards the biblical data changed, which in turn, changed the *meaning*, the *interpretation* of those Bible facts, in his mind. And it changed because of what was going on behind the facts – in his imagination.

Romans 1 makes this idea fairly clear. Once the grid of ultimate devotion to God was abandoned and replaced with a grid of idolatry, mankind became increasingly deceived in his perceptions of the world.

because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools (Ro 1:21-22).

J. Gresham Machen put it this way: "...[I]t would be a great mistake to suppose that all men are equally well prepared to receive the gospel. It is true that the decisive thing is the regenerative power of God. That can overcome all lack of preparation, and the absence of that makes even the best preparation useless. But as a matter of fact God usually exerts that power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favourable conditions for the reception of the gospel."¹

For Christians, the shaping of the imagination becomes particularly crucial, because not only do we want our children to interpret the raw sensory data of the world according to God's view of reality, we need them to understand many things that cannot be seen – God's attributes, grace, justice, nobility, holiness, judgement, to name just a few. They will only understand these ultimate unseen realities through the imagination – through the analogies that explain the unseen with the seen. If their imaginations are filled with incorrect analogies, they will misconstrue and misunderstand unseen realities that are critical to the gospel and the Christian life. Worse, they will respond to those realities wrongly, treating them differently to what they are.

The question for Christian parents becomes, how is that grid shaped? How does one shape the imagination so that the child has a prejudice towards Christianity's truths, both before and long after he has embraced them? Parents need to think long and hard how to shape those *prior conditions of the mind*.

Understanding the Imagination

If we want our children to love and embrace the 'facts' of the gospel, we need to step back and think about how children gain their knowledge.

Notice what God calls for in Deuteronomy 6:6-9:

"You shall teach them" – verbal instruction. We need to actually be taught what Scripture teaches. In formal times and informal times, in unplanned moments and planned moments, in times of correction and in times of celebration, our children should be getting "God's perspective". How does God see this? What does God want? What would please God? Why did God allow this, or make this, or give us this? What is most important?

"Shall be in your heart" – example. We need to love the things we want them to love. We must desire and thirst for what we long for them to have. We then model the habits, behaviours, thinking, reactions, and attitudes that they absorb. They learn our priorities, our desires, our hopes and fears, our longings. They learn by how husband and wife treat each other, by how parents speak to the children.

1 . *The Princeton Theological Review*, Vol. 11, 1913, 7.

“When you sit in your house...” – routines. Our lives have rhythms. These rhythms and repeated actions teach the child what our lives are about. They begin to understand what life revolves around, what is a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly act.

“Sign in your hand” – rituals, acts of devotion. When we partake in certain symbolic acts, these are some of the most powerful moments for shaping the mind. Some people only see these in rare moments: weddings, funerals. But when we symbolise ultimate realities with special acts, a child’s worldview is powerfully shaped.

A parent’s role is far more than entering facts into the child’s CPU, as if a human soul could be compared to a computer. A parent has twenty years or so to shape a child’s picture of reality. He or she is a crucial part of putting together a child’s internal mental map, using all kinds of analogies. As we build these analogies, we are not only shaping a child’s grid, we are teaching him how he ought to *feel* about the facts he will encounter. Before the child’s vocabulary has even filled out, we are providing him with a sense of proportion: *this* is like *that*, and *deserves* this kind of response. I say again, many parents think the goal of training is the imparting of cognitive knowledge. However, if you would like your child to rightly interpret the knowledge he encounters, you must shape his imagination through analogous knowledge.