# From Generation to Generation: Education, children and the purpose of God.

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***Psalm 78: 5-7: 'He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children,so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments'.***

*"In the space of just a few decades, homosexuality has gone from being a criminal offence to a psychological disorder, to an acceptable way of life, to today, the 'new virtue'. Without doubt, we are living in a time of massive moral and cultural change."*[i] *The shift towards same sex marriage in Australia has happened quickly. Just a short time ago, neither major party in Australia would support changing the meaning of marriage in law. Momentous social change of this nature leaves us with the question of how a revolution of this type has occurred; how does such significant social change take place so quickly?*

The LGBTIQ lobby put their finger on the crucial ingredient long ago; they pursued it relentlessly to achieve their desired goals: education. And not just the garden variety you get at school, but the kind that happens in every social institution across culture and society: families, schools, health organisations, universities, places of work, government, the legal profession, councils, community groups, politics, and so on.[ii] The existence of gender-based programs like Safe Schools highlights the importance of education to the LGBTIQ agenda, the fact that if you can shape the minds of children and young people, the battle is already half-won.

Increasingly, Australian parents are expecting schools to educate students in things other than the 3'Rs', like manners, sexuality and 'how to behave'. Parents are in the process of shifting their educational responsibilities and expectations to governments and schools, which cannot bode well for the future of parental rights.[iii] But from another perspective, this shift highlights the fact that education encompasses far more than teaching kids how to do their times tables. It is of enormous moral and social significance:

*"We are constantly reminded of the fact that it is the whole man that perceives and thinks, that desires and wills … It is utter folly to think that you can inform the intellect without giving direction to the will, that you store the head with knowledge without affecting the emotions, the inclinations, the desires and the aspirations of the heart. The training of the head and of the heart go together, and in both the fundamental fact that the child is the image-bearer of God must be a determining factor … We should never forget that the education which the child receives in the school, though divorced from religion, is nevertheless an education of the entire child and is bound to make a deep impression on the heart".*[iv]

Our willingness to handball responsibility for the education of our children to governments and schools perhaps says something about the confidence that parents have (or don't have) to educate their children in the home. And perhaps, too, it reveals something about where our confidence as parents ultimately lies. American missiologist Ed Stetzer has observed that the world is changing faster now than perhaps ever, especially in relation to morality and sexuality. The task of parenting has never been more demanding, not least because we live in an increasingly confused culture; and the pressure is also being ratcheted up for parents who raise their children within a Christian worldview that is shaped by the Bible.

To strengthen parental resolve in educating our kids, Stetzer suggests four things to buttress our confidence. The first is to know that our identity, as well as that of our children, is rooted in Jesus Christ, and not in our selves:

*"Children and teens who see their Christian identity as a list of rules and regulations that they need to follow in order to keep God or their parents happy, will ultimately rebel against those rules, or will take pride in those rules and become haughty and judgmental of others. Instead, if their identity is rooted in who Jesus is and who they are in Christ, they can both value the teachings of scripture, but also love others who may have different views in the midst of cultural changes around us."*

Paul bowed His knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and earth derived its name (Eph.3:14-15). All family-hood is from God, and therefore our children are not primarily ours, but God's. One thoughtful pastor has stated: "Parents who do not understand this are going against what God has created; they have to strain to be parents in their own right, but this will never be convincing, either to themselves or to their children". It could, in fact, smack more of self-interest and idolatry: a parent who expects their children to trust and obey them in their own right may in fact be putting themselves in God's place. It is God's love that

children need first and foremost; and this love incarnated in and through our parenting. It is God with whom they ultimately have to do.[v]

The promises of God are for our encouragement, and not so much for the benefit of our family as for His: *"God will see to it that his gospel is proclaimed to every generation, and, to that end, our children have a special place in his purpose.We must not be introverted about our families because this conflicts with God's purpose, and is also harmful. Children who see that their parents have a frame of trust larger than what is going on inside the family are, by that witness, exposed to the grandeur of the true Father".*[vi]

As John Piper stresses, God is the starting point and the ultimate goal of both Christian parenting and Christian education; they issue from Him and exist for Him: "He is the first and the last and the center of parenting and education. He is the main thing in how you rear children and teach children and discipline children."[vii] Added to this, Jesus himself holds children in the highest esteem, and charges parents, and indeed all adults alike, with the responsibility to bring them to Him, and to not prevent their coming.

*Mark 9:37, whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me"*

*Mark 9:42, and if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone hung around his neck."*

Jesus was adamant about the value of children and the dire consequence of causing them to sin. The disciples, his closest companions, tried to stop children coming to Him. Jesus witnessed a scene (Mark 10:42) that sadly would be repeated through history, even to this day; the spiritual needs of children are often neglected or over looked by the church, and certainly by our society. 'Do we hinder the children by not instructing them properly? Do we assume that they are too young to understand? Do we take time to explain the Scriptures in a way that children can understand and help them to enter the Kingdom of God? Or do we just entertain them?'[viii]

If we understand the importance



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of our children to God, then we must also see that our parenting is of great importance to Him, and that He has made Himself the basis of our confidence as we pursue his goal for our kids, rather than our goals for them.

Stetzer's second foundation of confidence for parents is being unashamed in teaching our children what the scriptures teach, and highlighting for them how this is different from what the world teaches:

'I think we are in a key moment in our culture where appealing to commonly held values to help our children to make better decisions makes less sense today than perhaps ever before. I am not saying that things have always been right or correct, and I don't think there was ever a perfect era in the past, but when it comes to issues of morality in our culture, particularly around sexual values, there have been certain standards influenced by our Judeo-Christian worldview that have been perceived as the "right" thing to do and that "good" people would do. That consensus no longer exists'.

This gets back to knowing, Stetzer says, that our identity is rooted in Jesus Christ.

'And if that consensus no longer exists, we can no longer can appeal to "this is the right thing to do, as everyone knows" and "this is what good kids do" because good kids in our culture's worldview are now increasingly doing things that Christians don't believe and increasingly valuing things that Christians don't value'. Indeed, there is a growing negativity about Christian beliefs and practices, and in some cases they are increasingly perceived as harmful.

As parents and educators, we have a fixed curriculum, and that is God, and the truth He has revealed to us. God has testified to Himself, and taught us about Himself. He has provided this testimony for us in Jesus Christ, and a book: the Bible. "The Bible is the way God… reveals himself to us with clarity and authority today."[ix] Through the revelation and authority of Jesus Christ, and the witness of the scriptures, by the Holy Spirit's power, the church has been entrusted with witnessing to God's great work through the gospel, so that others may put their trust in Him. The Apostle Paul instructed Timothy to "guard the good deposit that has been entrusted" to him (2 Timothy 1:14). Parents, teachers and the whole family of God have this mission: guard the good deposit, and be sure to pass it on to others.

*Psalm 78: 5-7: 'He established a law in Israel and commanded our forefathers to teach them to their children, even the children to be born, and they in turn will tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and not forget His deeds'.*

What are the consequences when this doesn't happen, and the next generation forgets the works of God? Graham McDonald enjoins us to consider Judges 2 and the experience of Israel after Joshua son of Nun, the man God had appointed to help fulfil His promise to bring Israel into the Promised Land, died. 'After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what He had done for Israel' (v.10). 'After all the wonderful blessings of God, a WHOLE generation grew up who not only did not know the Lord, but did not know the awesome things God had done for Israel! And then in verse 11, "the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and served the Baals"'. That

generation did not understand or had forgotten how God had redeemed them from Egypt with amazing signs and wonders, how He had 'borne them up on eagles wings and brought them to Himself'.

So what exactly do we do when we fail? When we forget the goodness and lovingkindness of God in Christ? Where do we go? This leads us to a third basis for confident parenting: being clear and firm about our sinfulness, and the brokenness of this world, our culture, and especially ourselves:

*'The reality is, if we hold up a standard of moral superiority, we will either drive our kids to despair or to pride—despair in that they can't live up to it, or pride in that they have. Both are sins, though different expressions of sin. Instead, a better approach is to help our children to realize that we are all sinners and that we all struggle with sin; that brokenness impacts who we are and that it impacts our morality. But perhaps, and maybe even most importantly even for this moment, it impacts them and because it impacts them, a humble approach recognizing the brokenness of the world and individuals will cause us to rely, by grace, on the work of Christ in the midst of this broken world'.*[xi]

A wise pastor once said, "There is no infallible text book on bringing up children". And, we might add, there are no infallible parents either. God alone knows how to deal with sinners, and God alone knows what constitutes a family. Therefore, perhaps the more important calling for parents "is to observe him, and submit to him, as Father, and to represent his Fatherhood to our children". We are not required to be experts, but to know the grace of God at work in ourselves: "our caring for our children must be the revelation of God's grace in us - and none of us will have anything of which to boast, other than His (God's) goodness".[xii]

Therefore, if children are going to be secure, parents must first be secure, and the only way this is possible is for sinners is to brought into God's covenant of grace:

*"The first duty of parents, therefore, is to be confident before God that their sins are forgiven. Where this is not the case, parents will anxiously lay burdens on their children which neither they nor their children can bear (cf. Matt. 23:4)… On the other hand, if parents are convinced that God is gracious to them, they will be able to offer the security gained by that to their children".*[xiii]

We all need to be born from above. Children need to see their parents renewed and transformed in the knowledge of God and in His saving grace towards them in Jesus Christ. Parents need to demonstrate their weakness and dependence upon God for all things, including the forgiveness of their sins and His provision of a Saviour. If children see their parents participating in God's great plan and purpose for creation and history despite their sinfulness, this will give children great confidence and hope that they too can participate in the great work of God, despite the fact that they may at times disappoint Mum and Dad or fail to measure up to what they know of God.

Finally, our confidence as parents will soar if we topple the 'tyranny of conformity' that prevails in our culture. Understanding that our calling in Christ involves being different from the surrounding culture will strengthen our parenting.

For many of us, the fear of standing out, of being different, of not 'fitting in', can quell our courage in the face of those with whom we may disagree. Our culture exerts significant pressure on us to conform to 'the pattern of this world'. Yet, we are instructed not to conform, but rather to be 'transformed by the renewing of your minds' (Rom 12:2). We are in the process of being 'conformed to the image of Christ'; this is part of the sanctification that the Christian life entails. Stetzer remembers, 'When I was young, the most terrifying thing was to be different than everyone else, (but) of course as you age, the reality of this shifts and you're much more open to being different. But, too many children and teens often function like the well-known Japanese proverb "a nail that stands out gets hammered down," therefore they work exceedingly hard to fit in. However, that does not work for the Christian'. Our very calling in Christ is to 'shine like lights in the world' and 'stand out in the midst of a darkened culture by reflecting the light of Christ (Philippians 2:16). Embrace early, and embrace often, the idea that conformity is not a value, but instead that we might be conformed to the image of Jesus'.

Teach your children to embrace difference; God himself calls us a chosen, peculiar people, and we are constituted this way for a specific purpose, "that you may proclaim the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light," (1 Peter 2:9, HCSB). On our own, we want to become like the world, embrace the culture; be 'relevant'. Yet in Christ this approach will fail us: it won't bring the world into the kingdom of God as we often hope it will. This approach



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hasn't made us attractive to others, but rather irrelevant. The way forward is the way of difference, "a way that is rooted in the identity of who we are in Christ—that is made secure in who God is as our Creator who wants to shape us for a better way … rooted, not even (just) in history, but ultimately in the nature of God himself. Who we are in Christ shapes how we live, and how we live is different than the world around us".[xiv]

Our children need to know the testimony and teaching of God so well that they can tell it to the next generation. Education plays a part in this, and has always gone hand in hand with the gospel, the existence of the church, and the importance of Christian parenting. And we can see why: 'Train a child in the way he should go', says the writer of Proverbs, 'even when he is old he will not depart from

it' (ESV). Jesus issued a command to his disciples to 'teach them all I have commanded you'. Jesus instructed his disciples before His death and resurrection, and then gave them a 40-day 'intensive' on the Kingdom of God before His ascension. Paul hired the hall of Tyrannus to reason daily about Christ over a two year period.



*As parents, if we are confident in God, and our children are brought into this same confidence, together we joyfully receive God's commands to love and obey Him.*

John Knox declared, 'where there is a church, there should be a school'. But parents are not alone in their educational efforts. Schools exist to support this enterprise; the church also works with parents in this regard. And it's not meant to be primarily an individual effort; our entire community should be dedicated to this end: church, school, family, friends, singles and couples. Education in the knowledge of God is the vocation of all God's people together.

This will mean that we can't skimp on basic educational skills. 'Since the testimony and instruction of God is in a book, this means that we will labor to teach our children to read. There is always room for improvement in how we read. And the main incentive to grow and improve in our reading is that the infinitely glorious God who made all things and who loves us and plans our future has testified and taught in a book'.[xv]

John Piper, however, draws a clear distinction between teaching and knowing: 'we cannot make our children learn. We can make ourselves teach. But we cannot make them know. Knowing is a precious thing. The kind of knowing God has in mind here is more than mere memory or raw mental awareness. Knowing is seeing into the real beauty of truth and embracing it for the treasure that it is'. Parents cannot force this; we can put God first, love our kids, pray for them, and teach them, but ultimately only God can give the knowledge that will bring our children into His kingdom. This knowing is the basis for the fulfilment of God's purposes for our children, and just as He wants confidence for us as parents, he wants confidence for them too: 'the whole point of their 'knowing' is that our children put their confidence in God. God has testified and taught that there might be a deposit of reliable truth that we might teach it to our children that they might know it and embrace it—why? So that they might put their confidence in God'.

This is the aim of all true education: to deepen and broaden confidence in God. This keeps us from pride, because true knowledge teaches us that we depend upon God for what we know. Knowledge that teaches us to rely upon ourselves, that throws us back onto our own resources, that ends in self-sufficiency rather than dependence upon God is not true knowledge, but fundamentally flawed. Our confidence, however, has a particular outcome: "Our confidence in God, rooted in knowledge of God's testimony and teaching, must lead to a life of obedience. When our children are confident in God, they will follow the commandments of God. Outward obedience will not be legalistic conformity to external pressures and expectations. It will be the fruit of internal confidence—not self-confidence, but God-confidence". As parents, if we are confident in God, and our children are brought into this same confidence, together we joyfully receive God's commands to love and obey Him. "Then the beauty and worth and wisdom and love and justice of God shine out in the world. And that is why the world was created—that the knowledge of the glory of God might fill the earth the way the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14)".[xvi]

## Endnotes


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iii Stephanie Balogh, 'Parents raise their expectations for a well-rounded education', The Australian, October 10, 2017.

iv Louis Berkhof and Cornelius Van Til, Foundations of Christian Education, 1953, pp 32-33.

v Grant Thorpe, Christian parents and their children, New Creation publications, Blackwood, 1989, pp.9-10.

vi Ibid.

vii John Piper, 'Raising children who are confident in God', https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/raising-children-who-are-confident-in-god

viii Edited from material available from Graham McDonald, DIDUNO Network. See also http://diduno.info/.

ix John Piper, 'Raising children who are confident in God', https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/raising-children-who-are-confident-in-god

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xi Stetzer, the new morality

xii Grant Thorpe, Christian Parents and their Children, preface,

xiii Ibid, pp.1-2.

xvi Ed Stetzer, The new morality: Raising Kids in a Confused Culture, Christianity Today, http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/january/new-morality-raising-kids-in-confused-culture.html

xv John Piper, 'Raising children who are confident in God', https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/raising-children-who-are-confident-in-god

xvi Ibid.