

# Will Our Children Have Faith? A Call for Generational Faith-Transference

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## **Abstract**

*It is a general statistic<sup>1</sup> that 50% of children raised up in Christian's homes will not embrace the Christian faith as their own by the time they graduate from high school. This article espouses the recognition of generational faith-transference as the key to passing Christian faith and heritage. This article posits the importance of parents taking up their responsibility in leading their children spiritually and not to pass their responsibility to "professionals" within the church. While most parents are focused on the development of the bodies and minds of their children through athletics, sport and education, this article militates for the concentration on the inner life and calls for parents to become "spiritual" coaches to their children so that faith in Christ is encouraged through spiritual formation that takes place at home that brings into focus the holistic personality development of the child.*

## **1. Introduction**

Greener (2003:41) acknowledges that development in children is something that does not just happen. They are not passive recipients of life events, but active players who bring individual characteristics and past personal experiences to every situation, making every child's personal experience a unique one within a general child development framework. The question that comes to focus is what are qualities within the child and the child's environment that promotes a healthy outcome of spiritual formation?

To engage the topic on spiritual formation, I would argue for a definition of such term precisely for the purpose of the negative connotation spiritual formation carries within Evangelicalism. For many Evangelicals such a term means identification with Roman Catholicism, however to speak of spiritual formation in this article is the means (or agencies) that do the shaping of the human personality and life that brings one to faith and also the deepening of that faith in Christ. Thus, May (1982:6) writes, "Spiritual formation is a rather general term referring to all attempts, means, instructions, and disciplines intended towards deepening of faith and furtherance of spiritual growth. It includes educational endeavours as well as the more intimate and in-depth process of spiritual direction." However, terminology such as nature, admonition, faith development and character formation all refer to that of empowering an individual to find Christ as Saviour and grow in His likeness. Spiritual formation then is a step by step process through which a child is guided, admonished and encouraged to embrace Christ as Saviour and disciplined to live an authentic Christian life through the empowerment of

the Holy Spirit. Thus, spiritual formation integrates the total personality development of the child. The physical, intellectual, emotional and social aspects must be seen as spiritual as we guide our children in faith development. The reason for the articulation of this article is because I believe that the interest in spiritual formation has gained interest due to fact that the church has not done well in dealing with the reality of developing disciples but also to call on parents and grandparents to take on their rightful responsibility in the faith formation of their children.

The *telos* (purpose) of the Christian life for Evangelicals is to know God personally and to become more like Jesus Christ i.e. to love God and others. In developing a methodology for faith formation in a child, I posit that parents and grandparents must learn to work with God through the Holy Spirit to discover how they can help children develop spiritually as part of their holistic personality structure. Psalm 139:13-16 declares:

- <sup>13</sup> For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- <sup>14</sup> I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.
- <sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place,  
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
- <sup>16</sup> Your eyes saw my unformed body;  
all the days ordained for me were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.

Spiritual formation begins before a child is born and the results continue throughout the lifespan of the child. As a human being created in the image of God from conception<sup>2</sup>, each person is shaped by the creator, by relationships with others, by environment and society.

Thus, everyone receives spiritual formation, just as everyone gets an education. The only question is whether it is a good one or a bad one. Parents need to take a conscious, intentional hand in this developmental process. We need to understand what the formation of the human spirit is, and how it can best be done as Christ would have it done. This is an indispensable aspect of developing a psychology that is adequate to human life. Thus generational faith transference cannot begin too soon in preparing children for life.

This can be convincingly seen when the Apostle Paul charged Timothy to continue in the faith that he had learnt from his infancy which made him wise for Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (2 Tm 3:14).

## **2. A Biblical Basis for Spiritual Formation at Home.**

There are many references in Scripture that consist of commands to families regarding spiritual formation. Genesis 18:19 is the pinnacle example of parental responsibility in modelling and teaching spiritual truths. Calvin (2001:177) in the

*Crossway Classic Commentaries* rightfully argues:

The scope of God's purpose [in telling Abraham his plan] must be carefully noted. His will, as made known to Abraham, bound all Abraham's descendants. Certainly God does make his will known to us so that knowledge of him should not die with us. He requires us to be his witness to the next generation, so that they may in turn hand on what they have received from us to their descendants...In this way we must propagate God's truth. It was not given for our private enjoyment; we must mutually strengthen one another according to our calling and faith.

In Genesis 18:16-19 God says that he had chosen Abraham to be a teacher, specifically a teacher of the way of the Lord and a teacher of righteousness and justice. This spiritual formation will start with his children and then passed on to "his household after him." This means that there will have to be generational faith transmission- which is exactly what is found in Deuteronomy 6:7-9. Two phrases will be investigated in Genesis 18:16-19 namely: "keeping the way of the Lord" and "doing righteousness and justice."

## **2.1 "The Way of the Lord"**

The phrase "keeping the way of the Lord" or "walking in the way of the Lord" was a common metaphor that was used in the OT to describe a particular aspect of Israel's spiritual formation. This was to portray that walking in "YHWH's" way is different from the ways of other gods, or the ways of other nations.

Wright explains (2010: 88) that the metaphor "walking in the ways of God" seem to have two possible pictures in mind. One is that of following someone else on a path, watching his/her footsteps following along carefully in the way he/she is going. This speaks of the imitation of God, or the reflection of his character. The other picture is of setting on a path following the instructions that someone has given to you or a set of directions that someone has given to you to make sure that you stay on the right path and not to wander off on to a wrong path that may turn out to be dead or dangerous.

This instruction from God is not just an arbitrary rule, they relate to the character and value or desire of God. To be obedient then is to reflect God's character in human life. Micah 6:8 eloquently summarises this:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

## **2.2 "Doing Righteousness and Justice"**

The word righteousness comes from the Hebrew word *sedeq* which means straight or rightness. It is thus means a norm or standard – something by which others things are measured (Lv 19:36, Ps 23:3). When it comes to human action and relationship, it speaks of conformity to what is right and expected or to do

the right thing.

The word justice comes from the Hebrew word *sapat* which refers to legal action in its widest sense it conveys the meaning “to put things right”, to intervene in a situation that is wrong, oppressive, or out of control, and to fix it.

Here in Genesis 18:19 the two words are paired to form a comprehensive phrase. This pairing is what is technically called a *hendiadys* (like “law and order”). According to Wright (2010:91) the nearest to the English expression of the Hebrew double word phrase would be “social justice”. Thus, the OT understanding of righteousness and justice are actual actions that you do, not concepts one reflects on or an ideal one dreams about. Abraham was to teach his household the way of the Lord and about doing the right things as practical actions. This spiritual formation was to be passed down through the generations.

Thus, the Old Testament bears witness that God expected the patriarchs to evidence spiritual formation in their lives and family responsibilities. They were to teach God’s law and commandments and lead their families according to the way of the Lord or according to God’s plans. When they did the nation of Israel prospered and was successful spiritually. When they did not they suffered for their sin and became spiritually destitute.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ emphasised the significance of children and set an example of taking time to be with them and praying with them (Mk 10:13-16). Paul instructs the church at Ephesus and Colosse to nurture and discipline their children. It is quite interesting to note that there is not a single reference in the NT that places the responsibility of training children with the church. God has given parents the divine responsibility to “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4), and this training or spiritual formation is initiated at home.

### **3. Models for Child Development**

Spiritual formation begins with the rejection of the centuries-old tradition of a false dichotomy that divides life in the categories of sacred and the secular. All life that is lived is lived by faith in Jesus Christ so to spiritualize our hearts in earthly employment. The family then is seen not only as a social unit but where the common is translated into potential pointers of God’s grace. It is then reasonable to state that the family more than the church becomes a centre for instruction in Christian doctrine and morals.

Over the years within the established tradition of church, two models of teaching truth have been appropriated. The Piagetian<sup>3</sup> model sees faith through the lens of rationality. This model articulates that the construction of faith takes place primarily in ones’ mental sphere as the individual assess knowledge according to pre-established rational criteria called schema which is understood as the under-

lying rational structure of the mind that represent some aspects of ones' external reality Kim (2006: 310).

However, according to Kim (2006: 310-311) this model is flawed (despite the fact that it is the most popular model within Christian education) because it depicts faith as nothing more than a set of rational determinants shaping one spiritual life. Faith then is seen as just an intellectual understanding of truth. This model sees faith formation through the process of receiving information and acting upon it to make it known to oneself, the comprehension of this very information triggers some form of faith, which in turn generates faith. Under this system analytical knowledge and reasoning become the dependant cause of spiritual formation. This view then becomes an incomplete model for spiritual formation because to a large extent it depends on the intellectual experience as if Christianity is a theory to be studied. Bramer (2005:354) states that while knowledge is important, there is a naïve comprehension that if knowledge is present then faith, virtue, compassion, justice, worship and so on will automatically follow. Spiritual formation deliberately brings into focus with its concerns of receiving/listening, responding, valuing, prioritizing and becoming. In the development of children the cognitive is only one part of spiritual formation.

To deal with the inadequacies of Piaget's model, there emerged the theoretical articulation of Vygotsky's<sup>4</sup> model. Unlike the former model, those within the Vygotskian tradition contend that faith formation is closely linked to the inter-mental activity of *thema* involving human-God, human-human and human-context interaction. This model represents a view that in the development of spiritual formation, the personal relational situation is inseparable from the manner in which a person thinks and interprets his/her faith. Thus it is asserted that perceptual experience involving critical thinking is the source of spiritual formation. This model then suggests that faith results from the interaction with content, reflection and experience rather than from any one factor. This method of spiritual formation typically involves three stages:

### **3.1 Reflective Observation**

In this stage faith is conceived through observation. This is where the child seeks to understand both the internal and external structures of truth. In understanding truth the child observes the orientation, value and significance of a given environment, and evaluates the prominence or estimable value of what is being offered or seen lived out by the significant other. This is then internalized as conviction that guides faith through its formation process. Having internalized through reflection the child moves on to the second stage of spiritual formation.

### **3.2 Critical Analysis**

During this stage of faith formation previously conceived convictions are questioned, doubted, and criticized. The degree to which the evaluation is articulated depends on three following factors:

- 1) the relevance and the credibility of the truth being taught,
- 2) the person who is teaching or embodying the concept being taught,
- 3) the child's own present situation when the lessons are to be applied.

### **3.3 Synthesis/Action**

The third and final stage according to Vygotsky's model is, Synthesis/Action. During this stage, a favourable experience becomes more tangible through application. Continuous interactions between the child and the situational experience take place dialectically. This is where the child develops praxis of that knowledge, which serves as a framework to either validate or reject the truth being taught.

## **4. Parental Responsibility in Spiritual Formation**

### **4.1 Authentic Modelling that Empowers**

The home is the best place for children to develop their faith. The social context as discussed earlier becomes the catalyst for children to learn from truth lived authentically as seen in their own context. The parent who is the significant other whom the child trusts and understands to have more knowledge than him/her looks to their parent/s for the learning of truth. Unlike the Piagetian model that depicts a child must develop intellectually before formation takes place, the Vygotskian model sees the learning process done through those with whom the child engages. The child's learning of truth and faith formation starts by reflecting on his/her environment. This is where parents and grandparents have the greatest responsibility to be good role models. No other means of child training pay such great dividends as modelling. Parents need to have an authentic spiritual relationship and strong faith.

Children need to see this faith practiced in the life of the parent, so that they can understand through observation what it means to put ones trust in Jesus Christ. By life examples children can observe the credibility and the value of the faith being taught.

This modelling process then also becomes a sense of empowerment that builds capacity and resources in the life of the children to engage the world meaningfully and purposefully. Balswick and Balswick (1991:103) define empowerment as "the process of installing confidence and strengthening building children up to become more powerful and competent". The most effective empowerers are those individuals who have themselves been empowered by the unconditional love of God and the Holy Spirit

Parents accomplish this goal of empowering in three ways:

*A. Leading:* The most important step to spiritual formation in the life of a child is receiving Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. This step is essential for spiritual growth. Parents can do much to aid their children in spiritual growth by realizing that we are involved in a divine process as we yield ourselves to the Lord and al-

low Him to work through us in this awesome responsibility. Williford (1990:588-996) suggests that parents in order to lead must live out spiritual formation in their own lives and set aside quality time in their busy schedules to build effective and lasting relationships with their own children.

*B. Teaching:* Paul reminds Timothy that from infancy he knew the Holy Scriptures. His mother and grandmother were faithful in teaching the Scriptures to him (2 Tm. 1:5). The Bible does not indicate how this teaching took place, but most probably would have followed an informal setting. God's revelation should be central to a godly family that they should naturally talk about Him while they perform other activities (Dt 6:6-8). This informal training is done in a way that enables the child to not only see the faith being applied in the life of the family, but grow to understand it intellectually.

*C. Participating:* The churches responsibility is to supplement what parents do in teaching and training their children. In order for children to grow, children must be taught what prayer is and how to pray through a family and corporate church setting. Parents need to participate in a local church through regular church attendance, involvement and service. This is one way through participating in the activities of the local church that children also learn the way of the Lord and principles from Scripture on loving God and others.

## **5. Conclusion**

People "are made [fashioned or formed], not born, Christians wrote Tertullian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> CE. Thus, parents are ordained by God within the responsible, committed relationship to the family and to God to become the catalyst for the spiritual formation of their children. Deuteronomy 6:7-9 encourages parents to continually teach their children essential truths and guide them to grow up in faith. This commission implies that though the process of the Christian family/parental relationship and guidance children in this environment would receive their distinctive shape and orientation that is fully initiated into the realm of God through a dynamic relationship with Him.

## **6. Notes**

1. A study done by the Barna group done in 2006 indicates that despite strong levels of church activity during their childhood and teenage years, most twenty somethings disengage from active participation in the Christian faith during their young adult life and beyond. The research proves 60% of young adults have left their Christian training/faith ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)).
2. The researcher holds to the creationism view of the origin of the soul. The view argues that each individual human soul is directly created by God (*ex nihilo*) out of nothing. This position holds that the soul is created pure but is subsequently corrupted along with the body through the process of conception. The exact timing of the soul's implantation is debated though I would argue in favour of the time of conception (Grudem 484-486, Hodge, Vol 2

70-76).

3. Jean Piaget was born in Switzerland in 1862. He developed his theory of cognitive development in children based on observations made. He then concluded that children were not less intelligent than adults, they simply think differently. The key concept of the Piagetian model is the schema which describes both the mental and physical actions involved in knowing. Schema is then categories of knowledge that help us to understand and interpret the world.
4. Lev Vygotsky a Russian was born in 1896 and died at the age of 38. His theory stressed the fundamental role of social interaction in the development on cognition. He believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of “making meaning”.

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