

Childhood Conversion

By Jim Elliff

A woman came to humorist Will Rogers, saying, "I struggle with this problem. Every time I look at myself in the mirror, I'm proud." He said, "Ma'am, that's not pride, that's a mistake!" Now I know that you are proud of your children, but you have never been as proud of a child as a woman I met who claimed that her five year old daughter had never sinned! She was serious. I realize that this woman was not doctrinally savvy, or even a believer, but how can she miss the obvious? That's not pride, that's a mistake!

God says children are born sinners. They are, sadly, not born in Christ, but in Adam. "As in Adam all die..." 1 Cor. 15: 22. When David said that he was born in iniquity and in sin his mother conceived him, he was not describing an illegitimacy of his parent's, but the true nature of every child. He was speaking of what we call "original sin." Original sin is something that we should be able to see by mere observation. One police study on juvenile delinquency stated:

Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered: he wants what he wants—his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toys, his uncle's watch, or whatever. Deny him these and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness which would be murderous were he not so helpless. He is dirty; he has no morals, no knowledge and no developed skills. This means that all children, not just certain children, but all children are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in their self-centered world of infancy, given free reign to their impulsive actions to satisfy each want, every child would grow up a criminal, a killer, a thief, and a rapist. (Quoted from Reb Bradley, "Biblical Insights into Child Training.")

If it is true, and it is, that there are "none righteous, no not one," (Rom. 3:10) then my children are among those without inherent righteousness. And if they are without inherent righteousness, then they are in need of Christ and the salvation which He provides. This fact drives me. Though I believe in a growing moral awareness, but not an age of accountability, I am pressed with the weight of my children's need of salvation. Surely you who are Christian parents feel what I feel.

Imagine this scenario. It is late at night when your seven year old daughter arrives home from her children's meeting, announcing that she has "prayed the prayer" and is now a Christian. She produces a card which says that she has "invited Jesus into her heart," complete with date and signature of an adult sponsor. What do you do? Have you ever asked the question, "Just how do I know if my child is ready to become a Christian, or really even understands what it means?" Or maybe we should be less dramatic and say that your child is now beginning to ask thoughtful questions about God. What are you supposed to think? How should you respond?

First note that your child's questions about God should not *necessarily* be taken as an indication that God is at work in his or her life in any special way. It does prove that your child has normal intelligence. There is nothing at all unusual about his query; it is good to take advantage of that openness, but it is generally nothing more than normal inquisitiveness. Let me suggest that you prepare yourself by focusing now on three major aspects of God's work in bringing children (or anyone) to Christ. Knowing what God is doing (and He alone makes Christians, after all) allows the parent to help his child avoid deception, and will give you much added confidence in "reading" the situation. The three activities of God are conviction, revelation, and regeneration.

Conviction

Conviction is the work of the Spirit in bringing sin and the necessity of Christ home to the child's conscience. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness (that is, that there is only one righteousness and it is found in Christ), and judgment (see Jn. 16:8-11). In looking for conviction, we should avoid any preconceived ideas about how many tears or how much agony is appropriate and keep in mind that conviction is God's tool to bring your child to a hatred of sin. God alone knows what it takes. That there must be conviction in the preparation for salvation is, however, a bedrock truth. It is in the development of conviction that the parent can play a most significant part. By carefully laying out the law (the demands of God on the conscience), by explaining the consequences of breaking that law, and by continually emphasizing the exclusivity of Christ in delivering the child from those consequences, the parent cooperates with the Spirit in this special preparation of the heart.

Sin is, after all, lawlessness (1 Jn. 3:4). It is necessary to know the law in order to know sin. However, it is the weight on the conscience in his breaking of the law that is true conviction. Paul thought of himself as blameless in relationship to the law for some time (Phil. 3:6), but when the Spirit brought home the nature of true covetousness (the most internal of the ten commands) something powerful happened to Paul which we could all hope will happen to our children. Note his narrative:

...I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law has said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law [that is, he perceived himself to be alive], but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. Rom. 7:7b-9

One of the most striking features of the teachings on children in the Bible, both Old Testament and New, is the emphasis on commandment and obedience. These admonitions to teach the commands to our children bring to the forefront the importance of conviction. It is through the law that our knowledge of sin is made lucid. Our forebears realized this need by their use of catechisms, almost all of which included the memorization of the ten commandments, plus a great deal of other vital material on the nature of God's expectations. I'll never forget the pain I saw in my oldest child some years ago as he cried softly in a well of true frustration about his inability to do what God commands. Sin was coming home to the conscience. And by disciplining them we augment that sense of sorrow for sin and may "deliver his soul from hell." (see Prov. 23:13-14)

We can cooperate in the Holy Spirit's convicting process by teaching our children the awful *consequences* of sin as well. Many leaders refuse to talk straightforwardly about hell with children, but I disagree with trying to soft-peddle on the subject of eternal judgment. My children began to learn about hell as soon as I thought they could comprehend the most elementary truths. How many times more important is it for them to fear an eternity in hell than being hit by a car in the road? If we go to great efforts to keep them out of the street, should we not go to even more pains to keep them out of hell? Hell is worse than being hit by a car, worse than poison, worse than rape, worse than abduction, worse than anything you can imagine. You say, "I fear causing my child to have nightmares!" I hope you understand that I too love my children and wouldn't want them to unnecessarily experience mental trauma, but really, wouldn't a week of nightmares be worth it if it delivered your child from the eternal nightmare of hell?

There is a very real sense in which there is no one or no thing to fear other than the God who can deliver both body and soul to hell (Mt. 10:28). May I suggest as well that you take all

unnecessary horrors away from them by carefully monitoring what they see. I have great suspicions that the enemy of our souls would love to dull the acuteness of hell by images of violence and fear on television. Labor in cooperation with the Spirit for the depth of conviction which “produces repentance, without regret, leading to salvation.” (2 Cor. 7:10) For an illustration of this conviction, rarely seen in our day, look at young Spurgeon, who became the best known preacher of the nineteenth century:

For five years as a child there was nothing before my eyes but my guilt...Wherever I went, the law had a demand upon my thoughts, upon my words, upon my rising, upon my resting. What I did, and what I did not do, all came under the cognizance of the law. I seemed as if I was a sinner, and nothing else but a sinner...Was there ever a bond-slave who had more bitterness of soul than I, five years a captive in the dungeons of the law, till my youth seemed as if it would turn into premature old age?...When God the Holy Ghost first quickened me, little did I know of the precious blood which has put my sins away, and drowned them in the depths for ever. But I did know this, that I could not remain as I was; that I could not rest happy unless I became something better, something purer than I was; and, oh, how my spirit cried to God with groanings—I say without any exaggeration—groanings that could not be uttered!

I tried a long time to improve myself, but I never did make much of it; I found I had a devil within me when I began, and I had ten devils when I left off. Instead of becoming better, I became worse...Then I laboured to believe. It is a strange way of putting it, yet so it was. When I wished to believe, I found I could not. It seemed to me that the way to Heaven by Christ's righteousness was as difficult as by my own, and that I could as soon get to Heaven by Sinai as by Calvary. I could do nothing, I could neither repent nor believe. I fainted with despair, feeling as if I must be lost despite the gospel, and be for ever driven from Jehovah's presence, even though Christ had died. (Autobiography, Vol. 1, 'The Early Years', 1973, pp. 56-71)

In another place he said this about conviction:

I used to hear a minister whose preaching was, as far as I could make it out, 'Do this, and do that, and do the other, and you will be saved'. According to his theory, to pray was a very easy thing; to make yourself a new heart, was a thing of a few instants, and could be done at almost any time; and I really thought that I could turn to Christ when I pleased...But when the Lord gave my soul its first shakings in conviction, I soon knew better... (ibid, p. 49)

Do we see such conviction today? I don't think that most of our leaders or parents even consider at all the issue of conviction or the tilling up of the soil of the soul for the gospel seed. Unfortunately, some of our methodology prematurely “reaps” children and adults before conviction has a hold and makes many false converts.

Revelation

There is a poem by the hymn writer, Joseph Hart, which goes in part like this:

Let us ask the important question
(Brethren, be not too secure)
What is it to be a Christian,
How may we our hearts secure?
Vain is all our best devotion
If on false foundations built.
True religion's more than notion,

Something must be *known* and *felt*.

If the essence of Christianity is knowing Christ (John 17:3, Heb. 8: 11), then He must be revealed to us. It is one thing for your child to hate hell and another to love the Lord as One he knows. There is no Christianity without knowing Christ. And it is at this point where the parent's hands are most tied. There is no way to make this happen. We can present the beauty of Christ and of the Father, we can demonstrate before our children the joy of knowing Him by the intimacy of our prayers, etc., but we cannot force the Revealer's hand. Revelation is in the hands of the Revealer. In John 10, a passage that has knowing Christ the Shepherd at its heart, the sheep are said to know Him ("I know my sheep and am known by My own", v. 14), however, not all are said to be sheep. "But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, I know them, and they follow Me." (vs. 26-27).

Young Samuel ministered before the Lord (1 Sam. 3:1), but did not yet know the Lord (vs.7) before the Lord "called" him. The reason is that the Word of the Lord was not yet revealed to Him (vs. 7). Eli in this case did help Samuel to know that it was the Lord who was calling the boy, and gave him the proper response, which might indicate a place for the parent's intervention in interpreting events. When Paul preached Christ's cross in Corinth he said that to some it was foolishness and to others it was a stumblingblock, but it was the power of God unto salvation to the called (see 1 Cor. 1: 22-24). Here he is speaking of the effectual call of the Holy Spirit rather than the broader call of the preacher (i.e. "Many are called, but few chosen" Mt. 20: 16). This is another way to discuss this issue of revelation. One convert said, "Christ became as irresistible to me as my sin had been before." Observation and counsel are important here, but you cannot play God's part. Your child is not just signing a contract because he wants to close a good deal, but is meeting a person who has the power to reveal or not reveal. "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near..." (Isa. 55:6)

Regeneration

Regeneration, or the giving of life to a dead soul, is the last of the three major categories we should look for. In some ways this is the most often misunderstood. It is important for the parent to realize that regeneration, or the new birth, when it is dealt with in a more technical way in the Scriptures is mentioned as *preceding* conversion. At other times the idea of regeneration and conversion are put together. In other words, God gives life to the dead soul (Eph. 2:1) *unto* repentance and faith. Without regeneration, the dead soul continues to run from Christ (Jn. 3), and does not seek God (Rom. 3:11). But when God grants this life it evidences itself in conversion, or repentance and faith, plus love for God and true holiness of life.

The early Baptist theologian, John A. Broadus, succinctly stated it in question form like this: "Does faith come before the new birth? No, it is the new heart that truly repents and believes" (Catechism of Bible Teaching). Richard Furman, another Baptist leader described regeneration preceding and producing repentance and faith in this way:

It is therefore, beyond all contradiction a supernatural change produced by the Spirit of God; and there is something in its nature which is mysterious and wonderful,...but however inscrutable...its effects are certain...*its effects will be, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ; a hatred to sin, and a love to holiness; supreme love to God, and unfeigned benevolence to men.* (Conversion Essentials to Salvation, 1816, p.8, emphasis mine)

This becomes more easily seen upon examining the first chapters of John where the new birth is said distinctly not to be “of human decision” (1:13) and is, in effect, like the wind acting on the passive individual (3:8) However one believes about this, it is significant to note that no child, born in original sin, will ever get to heaven without this regeneration, or life from above.

Let’s make four admissions related to this matter of repentance and faith, or true conversion.

1. We must say that many, probably most, of those children that are supposedly being converted in our churches in the early days are showing no signs of conversion later in life. Think of all those who “made decisions” at Vacation Bible Schools, children’s programs, Sunday School emphases, etc., who are on our rolls yet have no real life in them at all. Is it not obvious to us that getting a child to make a decision about Christ in early years does not guarantee that they are believers at all? I have written about this elsewhere and will not take much time to support this argumentation, but it should be easy enough for us to see. The fallout is massive. Some who thought they were child converts, thankfully, have come to Christ later in their teen or adult years, sometimes without using the terminology or fully understanding the change that has taken place.

2. We also must admit that it is a rather easy thing to convince children to pray a prayer we call “the sinner’s prayer” (this prayer, by the way, is not found in Scripture), or to raise their hand, or sign a card, in response to a persuasive presentation of the gospel. I hope you understand when I say that I could get a fairly good response of supposed “new converts” from almost any classroom of children due to some persuasive skills. Whether I am getting these converts sincerely or not is not the question. I am only saying that children are easily swayed and convinced.

3. In the third place we should admit that we are often not even discussing repentance and faith with the children we are hoping to evangelize, but are rather using the unsupported terminology of “inviting Jesus into the heart,” a phrase and concept not found in the Bible. A better look at John 1:12 with verse 11 and Revelation 3:20 in context might reveal that the only verses we cling to for this methodology are not saying what we think they are. I am not saying by this that the Spirit of Christ is not “in” the Christian but that our invitation to come to Christ is different than the Bible’s.

4. In the fourth place I think we need to realize that the methodology often used in churches tends to encourage premature conversions. I mean particularly that the altar call system and the giving of immediate assurance as practiced by many is not a help in securing a sound conversion. This and the other issues above contribute to the struggle the Christian parent has in working through the issues of salvation with their children.

In the context of a nurturing Christian family it is often difficult to tell just when a child who is seeking God is truly converted. He may, in fact, deal with repentance and faith over and over again, seeking assurance. We know that there is a time in all their seeking when the believing child does truly convert to Christ from his sin and selfishness, but often that exact date is hard to know. For the adult conversion, it may be more easily discerned.

We have put a paradigm of exact dating on most conversions so that we tend to force whatever is happening in the child into a moment in time which he or she can remember, but the reality may be far more difficult to ascertain. For instance, my child has often prayed at night about his soul. I encourage this and often remind him and the other children, “Don’t forget to talk to God about your soul before going to sleep.” What I am looking for is not whether or not he has said some words in the right way that supposedly “bind” God to give

him salvation. No, what I am looking for, and what he is looking for, is a changed life. He is looking for the signs of being made a “new creature” in Christ.

When we speak of assurance, we are speaking of that which we know because the evidence is clear. This is the heart of First John and the other passages dealing with this subject. The way to tell if you are a Christian is not to look at the sincerity of a decision, but to look at the change in the life. As far as I can tell, there is no teaching in the Word which says that you can be sure that you are a Christian by looking back at an historical conversion experience. “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may *know* that you have eternal life...” (1 Jn. 5:13, emphasis mine). What things? Those tests which make up the content of the epistle. In other words, one’s assurance should be based on discernible factors which can be tested.

Once, when my oldest was talking with me about how he could know if he were a true Christian, I explained the issue like this: If I gave you a seed to plant in the ground and told you it was a certain type of flower, you would not know for sure it was so, even if it began to sprout. You would know more when it put out leaves. And you would be even more sure when the bud appears. But you would know for *certain* when the flower blooms.” My son is quite hopeful that he is a believer, seeks God with his heart, listens to and reads the Bible, seeks understanding when the Word is preached, however, he is still not certain of the state of his soul. He is hopeful and so am I, but not resolved at this point, knowing that children must be particularly cautious. There is no sense of being held back, rather he is encouraged to do just what any person should do—repent and trust in Christ. After all, we are life-long repenters and life-long believers. He will know “the genuineness” of his faith (1 Pet. 1: 7) as he faces those maturing trials of life.

What about that child we mentioned earlier who announces he is converted after the children’s meeting? Our response to our child’s expressions that he is now converted should always be positive, encouraging and sincere. We should help the child see the basis upon which he can have assurance of new life rather than take it upon ourselves to offer him an immediate assurance not ours to give. Say something like this, “I’m thrilled that you are repenting and trusting in Christ. More than anything we want to know that God has really changed your life. The way we will know is if you continue repenting and trusting and if you act like a true Christian—that is, you have a new heart that loves to obey God. Sometimes we do not know that until we are in a place where it really costs us to be a Christian. Maybe you will not know it until you face the choice between your friends and Christ. Let’s see what God does. We’ll watch and pray about it. As questions come up, we’ll talk.”

In better days, when sound theology was more prominent in our churches, the leaders would often approach the child who was dealing with salvation like this. They would, first of all, assert that children could be converted. However, they would emphasize that the child’s ability to *know* if they are converted *on a sound, biblical basis* was not likely, due to the ease with which children are deceived. The child would have been encouraged, prayed for, and guided. There would be no push for baptism because the responsibility of the pastor was to baptize valid converts. The validity of this hopeful conversion was yet undecided. The parents understood this and were comfortable with the process because, in most cases, this was the practice among all of their child’s peers. There is nothing that could be done to “unsave” a truly converted child. This process would continue until the mid to later teen years.

As a result of this kind of leadership, no child was discouraged from seeking Christ, or from repenting and believing, yet the massive fallout of those who were deceived, as we unfortunately find today, was abated. In other words, children were not told that they were

converted and would have to then wait some years before baptism. Rather, they were told, and I think rightly so, that time and maturity was needed in order to know if their hopeful conversion was genuine. At that discovery baptism would be as immediate as was the New Testament precedent.

Correcting our Mistakes

Leaders and parents must consider the benefits of returning to a better method of dealing with the souls of our children. To give assurance on the basis of praying a prayer or some other outward, immediate sign is sealing many in deception and makes them harder to reach in their adult years. Any casual look at the disparity between the rolls of our churches plus the numbers of supposed converts who do not even find their way on to our rolls against the actual changed lives being produced, should cause us to do some very serious thinking. In the manner of our great grandfathers who often exhibited such reasonableness and biblical wisdom, we should return to a method that both allows our active and vigorous pursuit of our children's salvation, while at the same time protects against large scale deception.

You who are parents can begin this reformation now. If you have taken a more "decisionistic" approach to your children, placing hopes of salvation on the sincerity of a decision instead of on a revolutionary change of life, then you may still be able to return and correct your mistakes. Go to your child and tell him or her that you now understand things much better and can help him more. I find that children are eminently forgiving and able to understand our mistaken notions, especially when they were developed with good intentions.