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Living the Faith

"He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him whether they are wise or simple, he will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings that they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is."¹

Two mothers of young children were talking after a church meeting. "I am confused," said the first, "about our little girl's . . . ah . . . Christian education."

"So am I," replied the second woman. "Our three-year-old is so busy with play that I don't know how they make him listen in Sunday school. Our family reads the Bible after dinner, but Danny doesn't pay attention."

"Well, I visited in Sunday school last week to see how they teach, but the children mostly just played."

These two mothers didn't realize it, but they had already begun their children's Christian education. Even before their children were old enough to go to the infant nursery at church, Christian nurture had begun. A child's Christian education began with their Christian parents.

This book is for parents who are concerned that their children

¹Albert Schweitzer. Macmillan Co. 1959. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Used by permission.

find a vital Christian faith as they grow. It is about *knowing* God and not just *knowing* about God. At any stage of life, a child may experience the faith because the Christian faith is about life. As we live with young children, sharing their problems, joys and achievements, we are dealing with religious concerns . . . the meaning of life, the value of persons, and what God is like.

Some people say that young children are not ready to learn about religion, others say they are. Some things young children can experience, others they cannot. Let's look at what young children are like to determine what religious concepts can be learned or experienced at this age.

What Young Children Are Like

Children begin life in a world of light, color, sound, objects and persons. They are learning all the time in different ways; seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching.

Young children are self-centered, they think that the whole world revolves around them. They don't know much about anyone but themselves. Five-year-old Sara had a hard time understanding that there were people in town who did not know her or even know that she existed.

Young children's concepts of time are not yet developed, so they may not remember last year and can't visualize next month. They are becoming aware of the change of seasons, but may still ask when summer is. Young children live in the present. They cannot understand when Jesus lived and even find it difficult to comprehend what it was like when their parents were children.

Young children have a short attention span. When I am teaching three-year-olds, it is not unusual for a child to ask me to read a book and then do something else before I am ready to read.

Children can understand concrete, but not abstract, concepts. They do not understand symbols or figures of speech. Not until the early elementary years can children really understand abstract words that have varied meanings.

Religious language is particularly hard for young children to understand because much of it deals with mysteries so wonderful and wise that adults must express these ideas in symbolic or abstract terms. The popular folk hymn, "Amazing Grace," is filled with symbolic language.

"Amazing Grace!, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see."²

Think about these words. Would amazing Grace be a super woman to a young child? Would amazing grace be some kind of surprising prayer before a meal? Would a child think the person was literally blind? My five-year-old daughter enjoys singing this hymn but admits that she doesn't know what it means.

A mother had told her four-year-old son that Jesus was in his heart . . . and in everyone's heart. One day when she was cutting up a chicken for dinner, Randy asked to see the chicken's heart. Then he asked her to cut it open. She asked, "Why?" He replied that he wanted to see if Jesus was in the chicken's heart.

When we begin . . .

How do we begin the Christian training of our young literal-minded children? Do we wait until they are older as suggested by Ronald Goldman?³ Do we give them a lot of Bible stories and theological language and hope for the best or believe that they will understand it later? No. Young children learn through experience, and the real meaning of the Christian faith is in experience. So what do we do? We live our faith with our children. You and I are not perfect examples of how to live, but we can help our children experience in their lives what people in the Bible experienced in their relationships with God.

In the early years Kim begins to learn who Jesus is, that God loves her, and what the Bible is. As she grows and matures in ability, she becomes able to understand abstract ideas and to relate these ideas to her own life. When Kim understands what is meant by redemption, the idea will be believable if she has already had experiences in her life in which an adult has said, "I don't like what you did, but I love you anyway." If all Kim's experiences have taught her that she is unacceptable when she does something wrong, it will be difficult for her to believe in a God who can accept her as she is.

It is important to begin early to acquaint our children with the faith. Researchers are telling us that much of a child's basic

²"Amazing Grace," No. 92, *The Book of Hymns (The Methodist Hymnal)*, 1966.

³Ronald Goldman, *Readiness for Religion*. New York, Seabury Press, 1970.

competency⁴ in life is established by age eighteen months.

Jean Piaget⁵ has found that young children learn by doing, by experiencing, rather than by memorizing or hearing about someone else's experience. Feelings about the church—happiness, fears or anxiety, rejection—are determined to a large part in the first three years. The experiences children have in the early years with the faith are very important in terms of whether the child will later accept or reject the faith. Some people say they want nothing to do with the Christian faith, but cannot give any reason for their decision. They may have had early experiences with the faith that made them feel unacceptable or feel that "God doesn't love bad boys or girls."

What does research in education and child psychology have to say to us about trying to help our children grow in the Christian faith? It says that Christian education begins before a child comes to church school. It also says that the experiences we live with our children from their earliest days lay the foundation for their faith, or lack of faith.

It says that we must develop and grow in our faith if we are to communicate the faith to our children. We must do more than just talk about our faith with our children. We must live it. We have more time with our children than church school teachers do.

A child's Christian education begins with what I like to call "Biblical living" in the family. The following chapters explore the idea of Biblical living which is adapted from Paul Irwin's article "A Biblical Culture for Nursery Children."⁶ I am going to take his five core experiences: covenant, creation, law and ethical sensitivity, redemptive love, and worship, and apply these to family living.

The Experience of Covenant builds trust and a sense of community as well as a strong self image. Living a covenant applies the Biblical idea of the covenant between God and his people to the family. Christian parents make a covenant with their children that binds them together in a community of love and concern. Erickson's idea of the development of basic trust

⁴"The Children We Teach" *Planbook for Leaders of Children 1978-79*. Copyright © by Graded Press.

⁵Sarah F. Campbell. *Piaget Sampler, An Introduction to Jean Piaget Through His Own Words*, New York: Wiley, John & Sons, Inc., 1976. \$5.50

⁶Paul Irwin, *The Nursery Teacher*, Fall 1971 Copyright © by Graded Press. "A Biblical Culture for Nursery Children."

and the importance of self-esteem are involved in the idea of covenant. (see chapter 2).⁷

The biblical experience of creation stresses the idea that God is the creator, but man is made in God's image and, in fellowship with God is also a creator. In this relationship, man is intended to serve as stewards of God's world and to participate in God's creative activity. Since young children experience God's creation in all their learning, I will show how children learn using Erickson's ideas of autonomy and Piaget's ideas of how new knowledge is gained. The child participates in creation with God by using the mind and senses and resources God has given us.

Through the experience of law and ethical sensitivity, the child experiences limits, self-control and responsibility. Young children begin to learn where their rights end and another's rights begin. Children can begin the long process of becoming ethically sensitive by learning simple limits and the reason for those limits. Responsibility comes, but slowly, through many and varied experiences.

Through experiences of redemptive love, young children can express their real feelings but still feel loved and understood. Children learn that they are loved and forgiven even when actions are unacceptable. Redemptive love can be experienced by young children as they learn to control their behavior under the guidance of Christian parents. Discipline can be experienced as redemptive love when it involves inner control of actions and encourages constructive expression of feelings. We can love the child and forgive as God judges, loves, and forgives us.

Young children can experience worship by praising God for creation and God's continuing action in it. They may begin their experience of worship by wondering. Adults can help children worship through experiences of wonder. Children can also help adults wonder and worship. Simple family worship can have real meaning for young children.

Awareness and use of the five core experiences can help us build a foundation for our children's faith. When a child has experienced the faith first, then theological terms have meaning when they are presented. Children who have had experiences with adults who say "I still love you even though I don't like what you did" can understand the truth of God's redemptive love.

⁷"The Children We Teach" *Planbook for Leaders of Children 1978-79*. Copyright © by Graded Press.

Children can praise the wonders of God's work when adults have helped them experience God's world.

What is Biblical Living?

Biblical living is living so all the persons in the family experience God in life in similar ways as described in the Bible. Biblical living is not doing everything the way it was done in the Bible or only reading the Bible. It can be done without using the Bible directly. The Bible records the experiences of a people with God, in their everyday world. The people in the Bible are very human. Read the Old Testament for stories of some very real people. Abraham questioned God's summons. Isaiah doubted. Jonah refused to obey. Our faith is based on experience in living, not something abstract or other worldly.

In Psalms we read poetry written by persons who were at times joyful and at other times despondent. I can relate to that poetry today. It was written by real persons living a real life. They cried to God to help them in times of trouble. They praised God in times of joy.

Jesus was a real person who lived among the common people of his day. He was "on the street" eating and talking and living with tax collectors, fishermen and children.

The faith of Abraham and Moses grew out of their everyday experiences with God. They lived the faith rather than merely talking about it.

They sought God's guidance and tried to live as God led them. Jesus called his disciples to follow him. They gained an understanding of Jesus' mission as they lived and worked with him. Albert Schweitzer talked about the disciples understanding who Jesus was only after they obeyed his commands and lived through some conflicts and sufferings in his fellowship.

Think for a minute about your own experience of God. I don't mean a vision or a voice from heaven. Most people I know have not had a vision. Some very religious experiences happen in the church, some outside the church. Sometimes we know God is acting in our lives. Sometimes we realize that God was with us only after an experience. God does not save us from problems, but God is with us as we live through them. Think about your important insights into the faith. Under what circumstances did they occur? Did a living experience make some scripture or

theological statement come to life for you?

Experiencing the faith in life does not mean that we cease needing the church. It does not mean that we no longer need to study the Bible or that theology becomes less important. It does mean that I cannot understand an experience in religious terms if I do not have any religious background. Biblical living emphasizes the daily living of our faith. It is a style of life that makes our faith and the faith of our young children come alive.

Things to Think About

1. What is your understanding of Christian education? Look at your child's church school materials. What are the goals for young children? How can you help your child acquire these skills, attitudes, and concepts?
2. Discuss your concept and experience of God . . . as revealed to us by Jesus Christ. What concept of God are we presenting to young children by our lives?
3. Review the characteristics of young children. What implications does this have for us as we seek to nurture our children in the Christian faith?
4. Look at the five core experiences of biblical living. Think of experiences you have shared with your young child. Which types of experiences have you shared?
5. We gain an understanding of Jesus' mission as we live and work with Him. In which experiences can we involve our young children? What makes an experience religious?