



Editorial: How a Biblical Worldview Shapes the Way We Teach Our Children

TIMOTHY PAUL JONES



Timothy Paul Jones oversees online learning and teaches in the areas

of family ministry and apologetics. Before coming to Southern, he led churches in Missouri and Oklahoma as pastor and associate pastor. Dr. Jones has received the Scholastic Recognition Award and has authored or contributed to more than a dozen books, including *Conspiracies and the Cross: Perspectives on Family Ministry*; and, *Christian History Made Easy*. In 2010, Christian Retailing magazine selected *Christian History Made Easy* as the book of the year in the field of Christian education. He is married to Rayann and they have three daughters: Hannah, Skylar, and Kylinn. The Jones family serves in SojournKids children's ministry at Sojourn Community Church.

To have a biblical worldview is to interpret every aspect of our lives—including our relationships with children—within the framework of God's story. At the center of God's story stands this singular act: In Jesus Christ, God personally intersected human history and redeemed humanity at a particular time in a particular place. Yet this central act of redemption does not stand alone. It is bordered by God's good creation and humanity's fall into sin on the one hand and by the consummation of God's kingdom on the other.

This story of creation, fall and law, redemption, and consummation is the story that Christians have repeated to one another and to the world ever since Jesus ascended into the sky and sent his Spirit to dwell in his first followers' lives. This age-old plot-line should frame every aspect of our lives—including how we treat and train children.

GIFTS FROM GOD AND SINNERS IN NEED

In each movement of God's storyline, it is clear that children are neither burdens to be avoided nor byproducts of human sin. Every child is a blessing and a gift (Ps. 127:3–5). Even before humanity's fall into sin, God designed the raising of children to serve as a means for the multiplication of his manifest glory around the globe (Gen. 1:26–28). A few bites of forbidden fruit, raising Cain as well as Abel, and a worship service that ended in fratricide took their toll on that first family—but God refused to give up on his first purpose to turn the family into a means for revealing his glory. God promised that, through the offspring of Eve, he would send a redeemer to fulfill his plan to pour out his glory over all the earth (Gen. 3:15; 4:1, 25). In a pattern that persists throughout Scripture, the family becomes a path both for bringing the Messiah into the world and for passing the message of the Messiah from one generation to the next.

After the fall, men and women still exercise divinely-ordered dominion over God's creation by raising children (Gen. 1:26–28; 8:17; 9:1–7; Mark 10:5–9). What has changed in the aftermath of the fall is that children have become not only gifts to be nurtured but also sinners to be trained. And yet, in all of this, the family remains a *means* in God's plan, never the goal and never the source or center of our identity.

1. In a biblical worldview, the training of children is a primary parental responsibility:

Parents possess a responsibility not only to provide their children's needs but also to train their children to reflect God's glory. This doesn't release the larger community of faith from a responsibility for shaping children's souls. The Great Commission to "make disciples" was given to the whole people of God and includes every age-group (Matt. 28:19). Neither does this mean that parents must be the sole instructors in their children's lives. Parents may partner with church ministries or enlist schools to develop certain skills in their children's lives—but parents still bear final responsibility before God for how their children are trained for life.

In the Old Testament, Moses commanded parents—and particularly fathers—to train their children in God's ways (the pronouns translated "you" and "your" in Deut. 6:6–7 are masculine singular in the original language). Moses expected children to ask their parents about their family's spiritual practices, and he prepared fathers to respond in ways that highlighted God's mighty works (Ex. 12:25–28; Deut. 6:20–25). These expectations persisted throughout Israel's songs and early history (Josh. 4:6; Ps. 78:1–7). This ancient heritage of songs, statutes, and ceremonies foreshadowed the coming of Jesus and explicitly recognized the primacy of parents in their children's training.

Paul reiterated this point in the New Testament when he reminded fathers to nurture their children in the "training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). Paul seems to have derived this phrase from Deuteronomy 11:2, where "discipline of the LORD" prefaced a description of how God disciplined his people to remind them of his covenant with them. In other letters, Paul applied these same two terms—*training* and *instruction*—to patterns that characterized the disciple-making relationships of Christian brothers and sisters. *Training* implied discipline and described one of the key results of training in the words of God (2 Tim. 3:16). *Instruction* included warnings to avoid unwise behaviors and ungodly teachings (1 Cor. 10:11; Titus 3:10). Such texts strongly suggest that Paul was calling parents—and particularly fathers—to do far more than manage their children's behaviors and provide for their needs. Paul

expected parents to train their children to engage with their world in light of God's words and God's ways.

2. In a biblical worldview, the training of children is worldview training.

This training includes far more than merely increasing children's biblical knowledge or involving them in a community of faith. Moses commanded the Israelites to teach their offspring to view all they did ("hands") and all they chose ("forehead"), as well as how they lived at home ("doorposts") and how they conducted business ("your gates") within the all-encompassing framework of a God-centered worldview (Deut. 6:8–9). "Wisdom" in Proverbs was conveyed from father to child and included not only knowledge about God but also practical skills for engaging with the world in light of God's truth. Skills in craftsmanship, leadership, and a broad range of other fields all fell under the heading of wisdom, which begins with "the fear of the Lord" (Exod. 31:3, 6; Deut. 34:9; Prov. 1:7). Persons outside the believing community may possess these skills, but only the believer sees them as God intended, as signposts pointing to the order and glory of God. There is no biblical warrant for separating the training of children into "secular" and "sacred" categories, with one handled by the world and the other superintended by parents. God is Lord over all of life.

3. In a biblical worldview, the training of children includes formal and informal components.

Moses commanded the Israelites not only to teach God's words to their children but also to discuss these truths informally throughout each day (Deut. 6:7–9). In Proverbs, the father passed on particular teachings to his son (Prov. 4:2) but he also provided occasional instructions in response to specific situations (Prov. 4:1)—once again, a combination of formal and informal components. The biblical pattern is for both parents to be involved in these practices of formal and informal training. The book of Proverbs specifically mentions the mother's role five times (Prov. 1:8, 4:3, 6:20, 31:1, 26). According to biblical scholar Peter Gentry, this inclusion of the mother is unparalleled in the wisdom literature of the Ancient Near Eastern nations that surrounded Israel. The father possessed a particular respon-

sibility to lead, but the father's responsibility did not negate or diminish the mother's supportive role in the nurture and admonition of children.

YOUR CHILD IS FAR MORE THAN YOUR CHILD

Viewed from the vantage of creation and fall, children are both gifts to be treasured and sinners to be trained. Yet no amount of training can ever raise a child to the level of God's perfect righteousness. And even the best training may not result in a child's perseverance in the faith; the popular text that declares "even when he is old he will not depart" is not an airtight promise to parents but a proverb—a pithy observation about how life typically works (Prov. 22:6).

Every order of creation, including our training of children, has been subjected to frustration with the gap between the glory of God's creation and the fact of humanity's fallenness (Rom. 8:20–22). The ultimate answer to this gap is not better education but a perfect substitute—and that's precisely what God provided in Jesus Christ. Through Christ, God himself bridged the gap between his perfection and humanity's imperfection (2 Cor. 5:21). The death of Jesus brought about the possibility of redemption in the present; his resurrection guaranteed the consummation of God's kingdom in the future.

This truth introduces a radical new dimension to how we view children. To embrace God's redemption is to be adopted in Jesus Christ as God's heir, gaining a new identity that transcends every earthly status (Rom. 8:15–17; Gal. 3:28–29; 4:3–7; Eph. 1:5; 2:13–22). As a community united in Christ, the church becomes the believer's first family. "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother," Jesus said (Matt. 12:50). Paul made much the same point when he directed Timothy to encourage "younger men as brothers" and "younger women as sisters" (1 Tim. 5:1–2). Because the church is a family, in instances where one parent is absent or an unbeliever, other believers may become that child's parents in the faith (2 Tim. 1:2, 5; 3:15).

What this means for followers of Jesus is that every child is far more than a child. Every child is first and foremost a potential or actual brother or sister in Christ.

Whatever children stand beside us in eternal glory will not stand beside us as our children or as our students. They will stand beside us because and only because they have become our brothers and sisters, "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17; see also Gal. 4:7; Heb. 2:11; James 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:7).

Every child is an eternal soul whose days will long outlast the rise and fall of all the kingdoms of the earth. They and their children and their children's children will flit ever so briefly across the face of this earth before being swept away into eternity (James 4:14). If these children become our brothers and sisters in Christ, their days upon this earth are preparatory for glory that will never end (Dan. 12:3; 2 Cor. 4:17–5:4; 2 Pet. 1:10–11). That's why our primary purpose for the children that we educate in our churches and homes must not be anything as small and miserable as earthly success. Our purpose should be to leverage children's lives to advance God's kingdom so that every tribe, every nation, and every people-group gains the opportunity to respond in faith to the rightful King of kings.