



Our Children & Young People

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
1. Children in the Bible: <i>a story of covenant promise</i>	5
2. Children in the home: <i>a world of covenant nurture</i>	8
3. Children in the church: <i>a place of covenant belonging</i>	14
4. Conclusion	22

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AT TRINITY

*But from everlasting to everlasting,
the LORD'S love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children—
with those who keep his covenant
and remember to obey his precepts*

Psalm 103:17-18

INTRODUCTION

God has blessed us at Trinity with several families with children. Many within our church family care for these young people in different ways, from looking after them in crèche through to teaching them in Sunday School and during their teenage years, befriending them as young adults, and involving them in the music for our services. Our children are an integral part of our church family, and we are very fortunate to have a team of gifted and committed leaders who lead and teach them across all the age ranges.

This booklet reflects on the place of children in our church family and the pattern of their teaching and involvement in our services. It offers a reference point for how our church regards the children whom God has given to us and attempts to outline foundational biblical truths to shape and direct the way children are taught and included in the life of the church family.

1. CHILDREN IN THE BIBLE

A story of covenant promise

God's relationship with his people is the most committed kind of relationship possible. In the Old Testament, God promised the Israelites that he would be their God and they would be his people (Exodus 6:7). This way of binding himself to his people, and them to him, is just like a marriage relationship. The name for this bond is a covenant. It means that God will never go back on what he has promised and his relationship to his people is one of absolute faithfulness.

When God makes promises to his people, their children are always included. Just as parents speak to a child as soon as he or she is born, long before the child can actually understand what is being said, so when a child is born to Christian parents God has already spoken to that child with promises. They are born into a world of covenant promise as real as being born into citizenship of a particular country.

In Genesis 15-17 God made his covenant with Abraham. But he did not make it with Abraham alone:

'I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God' (Genesis 17:7-8).

God promises to be Abraham's God, but also to be the God of his descendants. God promises to give the land of Canaan to Abraham, but also to give it to his children.

This way of speaking and acting is at odds with our modern individualistic culture where we often see ourselves as independent people who are free to think and believe something different from our parents. Wonderfully, God does not treat us as islands but as social, relational people who belong to one another as well as to him. Human families are right at the heart of this reality. When Jesus radically changed Zacchaeus' life he said, 'Today salvation has come to this *house*, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham' (Luke 19:9).

God's covenant promises to Abraham set a pattern for the rest of the Bible. Children of believers receive God's promises along with their parents. Consider the following passages:

'Know therefore that the LORD is your God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands' (Deuteronomy 7:9).

'This is my covenant with them', says the LORD. 'My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children' (Isaiah 59:21).

'They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me so that they will never turn away from me' (Jeremiah 32:38-40).

This inclusion of children in covenant promises does not disappear with the coming of Jesus Christ. The covenant is everlasting. The arrival of Christ in the world demonstrates God's faithfulness to all

the generations of his people, not his rejection of them. Mary, the mother of the Lord, says:

‘From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation’ (Luke 1:48-49).

This is why on the Day of Pentecost the apostle Peter explains the good news of Jesus in the language of God’s covenant promises:

‘Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call’ (Acts 2:38-39).

From start to end the Bible paints a consistent and beautiful picture: children of believers belong to God from the very start of their lives. When little children are brought to Jesus, he blesses them and says that ‘the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these’ (Matthew 19:14). He does not say that the kingdom belongs to adults who become *like* little children. He says that the kingdom belongs to *such* people. It belongs to children.

‘Yet you brought me out of my mother’s womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother’s breast. From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother’s womb you have been my God’ (Psalm 22:9-10).

‘For you have been my hope, O sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth. From my birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother’s womb’ (Psalm 71:5-6).

2. CHILDREN IN THE HOME

A world of covenant nurture

A question naturally arises: are children automatically saved simply by virtue of being born into a Christian home?

The Bible is clear that the answer to this question is no. The heart of covenant-keeping is promise-believing. Children of Christian parents need to be raised to believe in the promises of the covenant for the LORD'S love and righteousness is 'with those who *keep* his promises and remember to *obey* his precepts' (Psalm 103:17-18). When God made the covenant with Abraham, we are told that 'Abraham *believed* the LORD and he credited it to him as righteousness' (Genesis 15:6). God promises righteousness to Abraham and to his children; *and* he requires faith and trust in that promise from Abraham and his children.

It is possible to wrongly assume that because I am a child of the covenant I do not need to trust or love the God of the covenant. Much of the Old Testament is the story of God's people presuming on their special status and thinking God would surely turn a blind eye to their unfaithfulness. But alongside the promises of covenant blessings, God also promises covenant warnings:

'Know therefore that the LORD is your God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. But those who hate him he will repay to their face by destruction; he will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate him (Deuteronomy 7:9-10).

Just as it is possible to be born into citizenship of a particular country but grow up to become a traitor to that country, so a child can be born into the covenant but grow up to be a covenant-breaker rather than a covenant-keeper. Therefore, alongside his covenant promises to children, God provides means for these

children to hear and believe the gospel: *believing parents*. God keeps his promises from one generation to the next by providing parents who love Christ, who treasure his words in the gospel, and who regularly pray for the Spirit's work in their children's lives.

'These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates' (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

Deuteronomy describes a home life in which children are saturated in God's word in a way that is 'intentional, multisensory, and constant'. The curriculum for this instruction is God's commandments, the *Torah*, his law.

We tend to think of 'law' as something which is merely a set of rules. In the Bible, however, the concept of God's law has much more to do with direction, guidance and instruction. God's law is his gracious gift to us. It is what he gives to light the path we walk. It shows us where to go, what to do, and how to do it, as well as showing us where not to go and what not to do. The Bible is clear that there are only ever two paths to walk in life: the way of the wicked which leads to destruction, or the way of the righteous which leads to eternal life. Jesus said there is a wide gate and a broad road which leads to destruction, but a small gate and a narrow road which leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14).

How do we know which road to take through life? 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path' (Psalm 119:105). It is God's word shining its light on our way which brings true happiness.

Psalm 1 provides a beautiful description of what happens to the person who meditates night and day on the guiding words of God's

good law. He or she walks in the way of the righteous not the way of the wicked, and so becomes like a fruitful, evergreen tree.

Covenant children are like saplings, born into the rich and fertile soil of God's covenant promises and we want them to become deeply rooted, strong and fruitful oaks by learning to delight night and day in God's word. Our children require careful nurturing and loving instruction to help them develop in this way. From their earliest days, we pray for them daily, and teach them from the Scriptures to embrace Christ and love and worship him as a strong king, a gentle friend, and a merciful Saviour. They need to be born again (John 3:3), and this change of heart is the mysterious work of God's Spirit (John 3:8). We do not need to press our children to make a 'decision' for Jesus, or require them to 'ask Jesus into their heart'. Rather, through biblical nurture, and with prayer, we present the gospel to our children all the time. Our desire is that Christ becomes so much a part of our children's lives that they never remember a time when they did not love him. As they grow in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, we pray for living faith in him and pray that one day they will publically profess Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

The obligation to provide this kind of spiritual nourishment lies with parents. The book of Proverbs shows the kind of instruction and discipline which wise Christian parents provide in the pursuit of raising believing children. A child who listens to and does not forsake the teaching given by his parents will, in time, resemble an Olympic athlete standing on the podium at the medal ceremony. The teaching of wise parents 'will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck' (Proverbs 1:8-9).

Parents are told 'Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it' (Proverbs 22:6). The word 'train' comes from an Arabic verb that was used of rubbing the palate of a newborn child with date mixture. It was an initiative to encourage

the child to suck. It means to accustom a child to a certain taste and to motivate them to take it in.

Christian parents initiate their children in the ways of the Lord from their very first days: singing with them, praying with them and teaching them to pray, and reading the Bible to them. For as long as they are under the same roof together, parents need to be intentional and disciplined, as well as creative and joyful, in teaching the Bible to their children. Indeed, the whole book of Proverbs is really a parental guidebook for adolescents about how to navigate the right path through a rough world of easy money and easy sex. It is a book about mum and dad teaching their children why and how they should ‘fear the LORD and shun evil’. They are developing in their children the skill of living well.

Although both parents are involved in teaching children in Proverbs—the valiant wife in Proverbs 31 is praised for her ‘wisdom and faithful instruction’ (v. 26)—the father is the primary teacher throughout the book. This is consistent with the rest of the Bible, where the weight of responsibility for the spiritual nurture of children falls on the father’s shoulders.

‘For I have chosen Abraham, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him’ (Genesis 18:19).

‘I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old—what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation’ (Psalm 78:2-4).

‘Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord’ (Ephesians 6:4).

Fathers in particular are often unaware of what fatherhood is actually for, and how God intends husbands and dads to be a shepherd and teacher of the mini-congregation entrusted into their care. 'He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge' (Proverbs 14:26).

The mother's knee, and the father's lap—*not primarily the church*—are the fount of true and lasting wisdom from generation to generation. But many wrongly assume that the church will do for their children what God has asked them to do. This has two main results. First, it leads to resentment on the part of parents towards a church perceived to have failed their children. Second, it leads to (at best) apathy and indifference on the part of children as they grow up seeing little or no connection at all between their everyday lives at home and church attendance on Sundays.

Of course, not every child in our church family has the privilege of coming from a home where both mum and dad, or either of them, are committed Christians. The fact that we have children from all sorts of different home situations is a sign of God's grace at work among us. Recognising these differences in their background, our aim is always to provide as much spiritual nurture as we can in the life of the church family.

It is also important to realise that the best of homes is not a fail-safe guarantee for our children. Children can rebel against the wisest and most loving of parents. God is the perfect covenant Father yet complains against his wayward children, 'what more could I have done for you?' (Isaiah 5:1-4). Parents should not be filled with inappropriate guilt.

Nor does this approach to covenantal nurture mean that the home should be a world of biblical instruction devoid of fun and joy and the sheer happiness and exuberance of life. In Deuteronomy covenant warnings are given because God's people do not serve

him with ‘joy and gladness of heart’—joy and gladness because of God’s good *material* gifts (28:45-48).

God’s people and their children should be the happiest of all people at the abundance of the world.

3. CHILDREN IN THE CHURCH

A place of covenant belonging

The importance of parental spiritual nurture does not in any way lessen the importance of children in the church. For instance, they do not have to wait to become members of the church; they are members of the church from birth. Just as fathers are instructed to train their children ‘in the Lord’ (Ephesians 6:4), so children from their earliest days can be encouraged to obey their parents ‘in the Lord’ (Ephesians 6:1).

The rest of this booklet outlines three ways in which life at Trinity reflects the fact that our children belong to God’s covenant family. There are two sacraments which show this: Baptism and Communion. And, in a more general sense, our children’s attendance at church services.

Baptism

Infant baptism is a natural and beautiful feature of the fact that God’s covenant promises concern not just adult believers, but also their children.

Our own families revolve around promises, and we have visual aids for them. Think of the wedding rings on the fingers of mum and dad. They are physical signs of promises made and continually being kept. In an even more profound way, Christ’s family has promises right at its heart. God has promised to forgive our sins and make us right with him, and he has given visual aids to assure us that he means what he says. In the time of Abraham, the visual aid for this promise was circumcision, a physical cutting away of flesh as a sign that God had promised to cut away sin from our hearts and make them new (Genesis 17:10-11; Deuteronomy 10:16-17). It was also a sign to the people of what would happen to them (be cut off) if they abandoned the covenant. Circumcision pointed *forward* to Jesus, and God told Abraham to place this sign on his

children. It was a physical reminder of the promise they had to grow up to believe.

As Christians, we too are Abraham's children. We inherit the family promises. But now we have a sign which points *back* to Jesus. The cutting away of our sin was performed by Jesus in his death, burial and resurrection; that is how God promises to forgive our sins and make us right with him. Baptism is the visual aid of what Jesus has done (Colossians 2:11-12).

And just as circumcision was given to Israelite children who had yet to understand God's promises, so baptism is given to the children of believers who are yet to understand. God's promise is greater than our grasp of it. Children of believers are born into a world where God's promises are cherished, and God intends them to grow up into the promises which belong to them. 'The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off' (Acts 2:39).

Christian children grow up with parents who pray with them, talk to them about the Lord Jesus, read their Bibles with them and enjoy being in church with them. It is completely in keeping with the Bible's pattern to give those children the visual aid which shows them that the Jesus whom we speak to in our family is the Saviour who washes away our sins.

Communion

All of this means that in our Christian families we bring our children up as believers. Our children, in the best-case scenario, grow up knowing the Lord Jesus, loving and serving him alongside Christian parents.

In our own families, which of course are only temporary pointers towards the permanent family of God's redeemed people, we would never imagine for a moment that children do not belong to the family. And we speak to our children from the very earliest years explaining that they do belong. 'In our family we do not put

our shoes on the table.’ ‘In our family we always sit down and have tea together round the table.’

So, in God’s family, communion is the family meal. Where Christian parents feel that their children can take part in communion in a meaningful way, we ask them to speak to the Session to request the admission of their children to the Lord’s Table. One of the Elders will arrange to have an informal discussion with the child (with parents present) which will simply explore the child’s faith in Christ, their understanding of the gospel and what communion means and requires of them by way of self-examination (1 Corinthians 11:28). There is no minimum age requirement for this and it is done at the wisdom and discretion of both parents and the Session.

On Sunday mornings, it is possible for children to sit with their parents for the service and to take communion and not to be in Sunday School that day. It is, however, maybe a little bit disjointed or unnatural to remove children from Sunday School and from their normal Sunday group to enable that to happen.

For this reason, and for practical reasons, the evening communion services are perhaps the best opportunities for children to take communion along with their parents. Depending on the child it is perfectly common for children as young as even 6 or 7 to enjoy sitting in church with their parents on Sunday evenings and to be part of the fellowship in a meaningful way.

Of course, where taking communion is an isolated religious experience for children it will have little or no impact on them or relevance to them. But where children grow up with parents who pray with them, talk to them about the Lord Jesus, read their Bibles with them and enjoy being in church with them, then it is entirely normal and fitting that they soon come to share with us in the family meal.

Worship

The clear implication is that our children belong with us in church to observe baptisms and be instructed about its meaning, and to participate with us in the family meal, under the oversight of their parents and the church's shepherds. This is consistent with the biblical pattern, where children were clearly present as the Passover was celebrated and able to ask about the meaning of all that they were observing (Exodus 12:24).

Our practice at Trinity is to include our children in our corporate worship as much as possible. The entire church family gathers at the start of the service for the opening hymn and prayer, as well as a short talk to the children. Primary school age children up to P5 are then taught together in age-appropriate classes during the rest of the service.

By the age they are in secondary school, however, our children are young adults, capable of listening and, by doing so, they will be aspiring to become like believers who are older than they are. To help prepare our children for this step, our P6-7yr old children are present with throughout our morning worship service and a separate age-appropriate class is provided for them.

Having children in the service from age 8 or 9 upwards may meet some objections. Some reflections are outlined below in response to some of the most common questions people can have:

(a) They can't take it all in and will get bored

Undoubtedly many things will go over their heads. But it is vital to remember that children of all ages absorb a great amount of tremendous value even if they don't understand everything. Although children may understand less in terms of quantity than adults, they have a great capacity to accept what they hear as truth.

So much of what children learn is sub-conscious. For instance, they tune in at home to whether mum and dad are being sincere in what they are saying and truthful in the promises they make. In the same way, children are capable of absorbing a biblical worldview from being in church with older children and adults who are engaged in what is being said and taking it seriously. They will notice how others listen and respond. Words, music, form of service, prayers to God and for others, can make impressions on a child's heart which we may find truly remarkable.

Most importantly, however, children's boredom can either be a passing phase or become a settled choice. The critical issue at this point is how they perceive their parents' attitude to church, and how parents discuss their boredom or objections with them. Parents have a responsibility to teach their children what is most precious in life. Children will come to value and esteem and respect the same things their parents do, if taught why those things are valuable and worthy of respect. Children notice not just how parents speak about church but more importantly how they *feel* about it and where it ranks on their list of priorities. Heartfelt prayer, joyful singing, hungry listening—or not—are the deeper elements of a love for being together with God's people. Children sense this intuitively, regardless of how much else they can understand.

(b) They are too young to listen to sermons

It is true that not everything in the sermon will make sense to younger children, and their minds may wander. But sometimes the same is true of adults!

Someone has said the mind is not like a shoe-box which can be stuffed with things until it is full and can take in no more. Rather, it is like a muscle which can be exercised to get stronger and stronger. In other words, a limited capacity does not have to stay

limited, and children are at the stage of life where their minds can be stretched and developed in wonderful ways.

Similarly, although you can learn a new language by carefully working through the details of grammar and vocabulary and syntax, you can also learn it by being thrown in at the deep end and listening at length to the language you don't know. Most people who have learnt a language would say the latter is the more effective means. As children listen week by week, and make a real effort to do so, they will find that more and more begins to make sense.

With young children present in the service regularly, we are committed to including as much direct application to all ages of the church family as we possibly can in our sermons. The sermons aim to feed us all, and present Christ and his gospel to each type of person within the church family. To help with this, a 'Sermon Notes for Kids' sheet is available morning and evening.

In all of this, parental involvement is the key factor. Capacity for engaging in the service will grow and develop as parents engage their children about the service, talk to them about it in advance and teach, explain and ask about it afterwards.

Many things can be done, and here we list some of them to prime the pump:

- (a) Reading *Listen Up!*, Christopher Ash's excellent booklet on how to listen to sermons
- (b) Preparing for the sermon together by reading the passage in advance and discussing it
- (c) Highlighting particular questions or difficulties with the passage in advance and seeing together if the preacher addresses them

- (d) Arriving at church in good time to show our children that the other people there really matter to us
- (e) Helping children to take notes and talking to them about the sermon afterwards
- (f) Discussing specific points of application that could be relevant in our families and individual lives
- (g) Discussing specific people to pray for in the light of the sermon, and others mentioned in the prayer following the sermon, and praying with our children for these people during the week
- (h) Sourcing good books which will help teenagers to develop their own Bible reading patterns
- (i) Making bridges all the time between the content of the sermons and the content of school subjects—history, modern studies, physics, language study
- (j) Encouraging our teenagers to invite people from the church family back for lunch after the service
- (k) Allowing children and teenagers to sit together in church and to be entrusted with responsible behavior which is encouraging and helpful to others in the church family
- (l) Discussing with our children how our lives and priorities would be different and lacking were we not believers
- (m) Finding specific ways in which our teenagers can begin to explain their developing faith to younger children, to new believers, and to their non-Christian friends

(c) They need to be with their peers

We agree with this wholeheartedly. We will always aim to provide appropriate contexts in which our children can meet together for Bible study, discussion and social events, and always with leaders who are willing to invest time and energy in developing good relationships with them.

The need to be with peers is also an area which involves a lot of parental input. When peer group opportunities are present, our children should be encouraged to be as involved with the group as possible. Where children are present in the church family but do not attend the children's events they will come to think that they are somehow different from the other children present. Parents should help their children prioritise the events which are laid on and, where possible, play a full part in facilitating with lifts and hospitality and other such things which will help the group.

The pattern of our children being with us in our church services is based on the conviction that corporate worship is too important an event in the life of the church family for children of this age to be missing. Their regular presence is a tremendous encouragement to the rest of the church and the potential for growing relationships across the age ranges is significantly enhanced by all being together as much as possible. One of the marks of growing faith in our children will be their interest in the older people in the congregation and the sharing of joys and sorrows together.

CONCLUSION

This booklet aims to show the basic biblical principles behind much of what we do in relation to our children and young people.

We would welcome questions about any aspect of it, and are very happy to discuss the practical application of any of these principles to spiritual nurture at home as well as at church.

With sincere Christian love,

Will Allan, Simon Barker, Lawrie Fairns, David Gibson & David Macleod

Trinity Church Session

February 2023

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Stephen Smallman, *How Our Children Come to Faith* (P&R Publishing, Basics of the Faith, 2006).

Bryan Chapell, *Why Do we Baptize Infants?* (P&R Publishing, Basics of the Faith, 2006).

Christopher Ash, *Listen Up! A Practical Guide to Listening to Sermons* (The Good Book Company, 2009).

Kevin DeYoung, *Amaze them with God: Winning the Next Generation for Christ* (10 Publishing, 2015).



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