

Children in the kingdom of God

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The meaning of children in society and in God's kingdom

Every society should give particular attention to the way children are being molded, for children are the substance of every coming society – and not only in a biological sense, but also regarding a people's spiritual substance. So it depends on us what attitude to life, to the world, to other people etc. the coming generation will have, what rights and laws our children will one day put into effect...! We are responsible for what will become visible only when our own power is fading.

In general, the molding of a person's values (view of life) is already completed in a twelve-year-old child. Even though all the doors always remain open for God, it is true that for us adults the time in which we can lay the foundations in a child's life is really over. Twelve years are a short time. We need decisiveness, dedication and resolution.

The child's place in society

Here we want to just briefly sketch three main patterns by which a child is accepted into the most varied cultures and on differing social levels – both in Christian and in non-Christian circles. The details within these patterns can vary greatly.

1. The child is idealized and idolized

He is his parent's possession. According to his gifts and pliancy, he serves his parents as an extension of their personality and is placed by the family or society in limelight as evidence of quality. The child receives attention because as a show object he fulfils certain expectancies and functions. He serves as a placard primarily with his clothing and education. The child is cared for like other status symbols. If the child later ceases to fulfil these functions, interest in him dwindles and soon he is no longer cared for.

2. The child is given little meaning

As long as the child is not useful to the society as a worker, he is left to himself until he has grown up and is strong enough to achieve something. Until then, his external needs are simply met, he is provided for. The basic attitude toward children is indifference. The relation to children clearly depends on achievement.

This attitude toward children is very strong in the Islamic world. The child attains a meaning as a member of society only when he is twelve years old.

3. The child is taken very seriously

There is a strong awareness that the child is a personality in himself, not just someone to be misused by the parents to present themselves. The child is respected as an individual. He is promoted in the maximum way, in the intention that by this the good in man can be kept and brought to flower.

The intellect plays a large role in the relationship to children. The child should grow up with neutral values, to the extent possible, so that he has the opportunity to form his own values. In no case should he be manipulated in the direction of any view of life, lest of all a religious one.

The child is made insecure by the parents' conscious refusal to give orientation. This forces him to use power in regard to his environment, to the point where parents and other adults have to orient themselves by the child's needs. The humanistic image of man is behind this attitude toward children.

The child's place in God's kingdom

It is often a great challenge for adults to treat children in a relaxed way, and not at all to be taken for granted. Either the adult himself acts like a child or he keeps the children at a distance. It is actually not easy to develop an understanding of their needs and perspectives. Therefore we must strive for God's increasing revelation of his view of children.

God takes children very seriously. In their relationship to him they have the same position as adults, i.e. he takes both equally seriously.

Children have a special place

God allots children a special place in human society. «He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me'» (Mk. 9:36–37). «Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.' And he placed his hands on them» (Matth. 19:14–15).

The child has an in-born sense of God

A child has an in-born sense that God is, that he is good, and that he can entrust himself to God. The younger the child, the less this sense of God is already covered up. This fact is made very clear in the following Bible verses:

«Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children'» (Matth. 11:25).

«But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, 'Hosanna to the Son of David', they were indignant. Do you hear what these children are saying?' they asked him. 'Yes', replied Jesus, 'have you never read, 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?'» (Matth. 21, 15 – 16).

For Jesus it is completely clear and obvious that these children have recognized him for who he is.

Children are not yet proud

«He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said, «I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven» (Matth. 18:2–4). So whoever humbles himself... Children do not raise themselves to the point of being the measure of everything, thus they do not raise themselves above God either. They are not proud, they believe everything. Therefore every child is wide open for the message that God is and has created the child to have a relationship to himself. Remember: The desire to know for oneself what is good and evil brought mankind terribly far from God – and this is still the main reason that many people do not live with God.

A child is defenceless

Because of his situation in life, a child is totally delivered over to this world, he is powerless. Therefore he is under God's special protection and care, like everything weak. «See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven» (Matth. 18:10).

«But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea» (Matth. 18:6). Jesus nowhere speaks of such a hard punishment as here.

A child grows in God's kingdom

The relationship to God is something which grows

In his defencelessness, a child is wholly made for trust. Trust is the element in which he can develop. The child is made for relationship because it needs help and protection. And God wants each child to experience this protection. God wants this in-born sense of his existence to remain and grow. This happens when the child has a relationship to God from the beginning, and learns to know him. If the child experiences an answer to his trust, if he experiences protection and genuine relationships, then God's kingdom becomes something obvious to the child even if he doesn't understand everything theologically. Through various «conversions» he grows into an ever-deepening dedication to God. (This is not different for adults.)

The example of seven-year-old Akim should show how plain a child's relationship to God can be. He prays to Jesus when the light doesn't work, when the fridge has a loose connection, when his mother has not yet received her check from the social services, for his brother in boarding school – simply for everything which is relevant at the moment. Asked how he started talking to Jesus like that he answered, «When Jesus came into my heart I felt him. He talked to me and told me that his name is Jesus. I felt that he is good. So I started praying and I know that he also hears me.»

Persons in authority represent God

A child experiences God and his protection, his trust, his affection and care through persons in authority who provide for him: parents, grand-parents, teachers, etc. A child experiences God in them. These people are for the child concrete realizations of the invisible God. The way in which they encounter the child, also the way they present God, talk about him, and live out their relationship to him, form the child's relationship to God. Even «no relationship to God» expresses something. Authorities can keep a child's open door to God open or they can close it – so great is their power over a child, whether they realize it or not. God has just arranged it that way. Therefore the consequences correspond (cp. Mtth. 18:6).

In childhood the life bases, life's foundation are laid. Concepts of God, the world, other people, and oneself are formed and made firm. During the first twelve years of a human life a way of looking at life is formed. Although a child of this age could not formulate it, it has gone into his flesh and blood.

Clear guidance strengthens the foundation

That is why a child needs very clear guidance in these first years, as the Bible also recommends. «Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it» (Prov. 22:6). Therefore a relationship to children means giving them orientation,

being an answer, and protecting them – including protection from all the destructive things proceeding from their own hearts. Life demands total engagement, a life dedicated to children. If parents do not heed this responsibility, the child will turn to others who show him a path. Anyone. Before a child in puberty takes his own stand in the world, on his own initiative, his basic direction has already been made firm.

Puberty: Learned values are tested

A child's thinking, feeling and acting receive a new starting-point. He detaches himself from his previous orientation according to parents and teachers and seeks one of his own. In puberty a child begins to take his stand in the world. He allows a direct confrontation with the world and tests his learned values in regard to their stability and «usefulness».

Weight is put on the previous foundation and a consciously independent building of one's life begins.

What a tragedy when young people have to realize that there is either no foundation or only a brittle one! How great is their need when they realize how helpless, how powerless their position in the world is because they have received no orientation marks by which to understand themselves, others, the world, or God. The destroyed existence of youths is in many cases a result of the pre-puberty investment in their lives. As important and necessary as it is to tell children about Jesus, it is also very important for us to realize that they see who Jesus really is and what he is like primarily in our relationship to him. For the most part children orient themselves by what they see in us.

On basis of the above facts we want to be involved in children's lives, besides everything else we are engaged in on the mission field. Wherever we are and whenever we can we want our attitude and relationship to the children to bring Jesus close to them as a friend and Saviour. We want to tell them about the Father whom they can trust and about the Holy Spirit who helps and comforts them. Our whole team wants to have this attitude toward children, even though not all are involved in children's work. What we invest or fail to invest in children and youth today will bear fruit in the coming generation, including fruit for God's kingdom.

Children are converted

The younger the child, the greater his sense of God. The younger the child, the less he can formulate this sense of God, his understanding of God, his relationship to his creator God. But this relationship to God, this insight into God's kingdom is present. It is very real even though a child cannot yet express it in theological terms. Where it is often difficult for us to take children's faith seriously, contributing much of it to their imagination, for Jesus the fact that God revealed himself to children in great measure is quite obvious:

Jesus said, «I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.» – But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, «Hosanna to the Son of David», they were indignant. »Do you hear what these children are saying?« they asked him. «Yes», replied Jesus, «have you never read, ,From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?» (Matth. 11:25 and 21:15 – 16).

Entrusted

Children belong to God and are entrusted as gifts to us in order to raise and accompany them on their path with him. Jesus warns us against drawing children away from God («But if

anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea» Mtth. 18:6). The goal of all our efforts should be to make children's relationships to God firm and to clarify and strengthen their identity in Jesus. Wherever children are entrusted to us the goal is the same, whether we are parents, teachers, Sunday school teachers, or on the mission field, as in our case. How trustworthy do we prove before God?

Children are complete personalities

We want to take children's paths with God very seriously. Together with them we want to make firm even the smallest steps they have decided to take, trusting in God. As witnesses of their dedication to God we want to help them remain on this path. It is usually in individual conversations when the children visit us during the week that we sometimes also ask them whether they want to consciously entrust their lives to Jesus and tell him he should be their shepherd, saviour, or friend. In simple prayers they then confirm the relationship to Jesus which has grown in their hearts during the previous time. Sometimes they formulate this themselves, sometimes we say a prayer for them to repeat. A first prayer of dedication may be a first step of many in which a child continues to make new decisions for a further, deeper, more committed life with Jesus. This is not different for adults. Thus children take clear steps out of the darkness into God's light.

And God reacts to this, setting children increasingly free and opening new doors to life. He speaks to them and leads them according to their ages. This is always fascinating to us. Even if this child should later as an adult turn away from God, it will still be easy for him to return to his God. We see this again and again. At least a faint idea remains.

Leading children on

We want to lead the children toward a goal in a way which corresponds to their decision. This guidance takes place in part during individual conversations when the children are alone with us during the week. Each co-worker remains a counselor for «her» children and seeks ways to guide appropriately. Depending on their ages, some children are given a Bible and are introduced to Bible reading. With us and alone at home they discover new stories about Jesus. We also continually look for opportunities to pray with the children.

This guidance is not equally successful with all the children. In this area also, lack of commitment and unreliability are hindrances. We repeatedly pray for just those children who seldom come to us. God will continue to lead them and strengthen their relationship to him.

Emphasis

A further part of the continued guidance consists of gathering the little disciples in our living room. In contrast to the children's meetings which continue to be evangelistic, we have set different emphasis for these disciples' meetings:

1. Getting to know God better and encouraging a trusting relationship to the heavenly Father.
2. Getting to know the Bible as God's word, learning to read the Bible.
3. Being a child of God: my inheritance
4. Relationships with other people, especially to the other children who have made decisions for Jesus.

The tension between the children's environment and the kingdom of God

The three- or four-room-apartments in our neighbourhood are usually inhabited not only by the families with many children, but also by aunts, uncles, grandparents and various cousins. Perhaps there is also a guest from Algeria or Jordan...! Even if the mother does not have to go out to work, she is glad when the children can spend their free time outdoors. But around the apartment buildings it is very dirty. Garbage lies everywhere. It was just thrown over the balconies. The »playground«, if there is such a thing, is completely empty, with nothing to climb on. And the trees which should have grown there have not survived. Since the children are not accustomed to toys, they look for something to play with in the garbage. Many have lost all sense of responsibility toward every kind of material. It is strange to them to take care of things, whether clothes or coloured pens. Even though they themselves have so little, they already have the attitude: waste, use up and then throw away. Among them the right of the strongest clearly sets the tone.

Contacts with families create space

Contacts with the mothers and whenever possible with the fathers as well is an absolutely necessary basis for our children's work.

The Gospel flows through the children into the parental homes and mothers, brothers and sisters, whole families thus come in contact with Jesus. Through the many mutual acquaintances, relatives and other friendly relationships in the neighbourhood the Gospel is made known and spiritual realities are changed! Because of the mouth to mouth propaganda, more and more families send their children to our meetings.

If children visit us several times we ask where they live and take up contact with the family. We soon see what sort of atmosphere in the parental home is influencing these children. Thus we can better understand many of their reactions and wrong conduct. When we make a visit, we can also sense the mother's attitude toward the Gospel.

For some it's simply a fact that their child visits a Christian children's meeting; others didn't even know that their child had already been with us several times; still others invite us to return and we have regular contact with them. The mothers in our neighbourhood trust us very much, a great miracle in the Islamic culture which is stamped by mutual mistrust.

Normally the mothers are disappointed, bitter, or apathetic. The fathers are often absent, which makes it impossible for the mothers to be real mothers. They often leave the children to themselves and eventually become indifferent toward them. Thus many are grateful that our co-workers have become substitute mothers for their children, who care about their neglect and take time for them during the day.

Our visits to the families create much space for the children. Their relationship to us is no longer a secret and because of that they feel freer to tell about the children's meetings at home. Mothers observe the changes in our children, without taking up a position against the Gospel. We want to fully plant them in their culture, their home, their environment. That is where they should live out what they experienced in the children's meetings, that is where they should be able to be disciples. Children experience Jesus as friend and saviour without being estranged from their families. They proudly tell other children that we had come for a visit.

Letting God's kingdom be experienced: during the week

It is surely one of the greatest advantages for our work among children that we live in the neighbourhood ourselves. We are neighbours of the many mothers. Our life is no secret, we are approachable and always reachable. The children have long known that they can knock at

our door any time. Looking for security and care, they really come at all times of the day and with all sorts of requests: Can you give me a snack? Can you help me with my homework? May I sing a song with you? May I make a drawing here? Alone or in groups they stand at the door. As often as possible we take time for these children's requests. We receive them in our apartment and bring them into our life. Sometimes they also help us with the cooking or cleaning.

The children always feel comfortable in our apartment and marvel at its beauty. It is impossible that this beauty comes from our simple furnishings. It is much more that they sense the atmosphere of security, the peace of God and the fellowship of our life. These fill our apartments. They have become houses of Jesus, places of refuge for many children. We are challenged to take a part in forming their lives, not only in regard to their concepts of God. For example, in our apartment there is a minimum of rules which they must adhere to. This requires energy and much alertness on our part, but clearly gives the children space and a feeling of comfort. We want to share life with them and let them experience Jesus and his riches in us. We rejoice over the visible changes taking place. Many of the children who were always looking for attention have become quieter. Knowing and experiencing that they are accepted has quieted their heart. These visits outside the children's meetings are precious encounters with individual children. We can strengthen the relationship to the individual child and build up trust. The children become increasingly open in this intimate setting and sometimes we have deep talks about their lives and about Jesus. Many of the children who have made decisions for Jesus did so during such a «private» visit.

Letting God's kingdom be experienced: during holidays

God has given us holidays. They give direction to our daily life. We live in anticipation of the set times and from them we can proceed with new strength and purpose. Hubbub and stress were surely not God's intentions when he first set such holidays for his people Israel.

For children also, holidays are special high points which they are excited about weeks in advance, and which remain in their memories for a long time. «Do you remember how last Christmas all the children celebrated together? You came to get us with the car and then we all ran away from you! And in the Christmas play you were Maria. The blue scarf was very pretty...» Holiday parties make deep and lasting impressions, woven together with many incidental matters.

Children are all too happy to be invited to all sorts of parties. But we also want to take the opportunities of many other smaller or greater events to let the children experience joy and fellowship.

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