



Editorial



Steve Holmes

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A few years ago the Church of England published a report asking how it and its parishes, should react to the rapidly changing realities of childhood in contemporary Britain. It was entitled, with delightful ambiguity, *Children in the Way*. Children are at once ‘in the way’ – experienced by some (perhaps supremely their parents) as distractions from the serious business of doing church – and ‘in the Way’ – followers themselves of Jesus, deserving of pastoral care and discipling, and able to minister.

In this issue of *The Bible in Transmission* we turn our gaze on childhood. Some aspects of contemporary British childhood are constants, realities that every child in every culture in history would recognise to some extent: dependence, growth, puberty, or education, for example. Other aspects are profoundly culturally contingent and very new: cyber-bullying, sexting, or the context of impending ecological catastrophe. Further, there are realities that have always been true, but that we are only now beginning to recognise: many of the present scandals about historical abuse of children reflect the fact that this horrific reality is now named and taken seriously in a way it never has been before. All these factors are in play when we ask about how children grow into Christian adults.

Rebecca Nye opens our issue with a discussion of children’s spirituality, founded on her years of work observing children and listening to their explanations of their own lives. She defines ‘spirituality’ as ‘God’s ways of being with us, and our ways of being with God’. We do not need to

create spirituality in our children, she argues. God is already with them and if we are attentive to what they say we will discover that they have ways of being with God. She describes childhood as a ‘highly blessed’ stage of life, offering evidence to suggest that significant experience of God is more common in childhood than in our adult years. Nye identifies three spiritual needs of our children: to be deeply listened to when they articulate their spiritual questions and experiences; to be respected; and to have space for spirituality (in every sense of the word ‘space’).

Anne Richards takes us to the Bible and what it has to tell us. God calls children to growth and development, she argues, even from the womb; because of this God wants every child to live. God calls and commissions children to minister, and adults need to respect and honour that. God values and blesses children. Richards shows us that these biblical truths about God’s attitude to children bring with them ethical demands about how we act and react. Her biblical exegesis leads to the same conclusions as Nye’s scientific observations: we nurture our children best when we respect and make space for God’s prior presence and activity in their lives.

Anna-Clara Thomasson-Rosingh picks up these same themes as she writes about using the Bible with children. She contrasts a closed-down method of adults instructing children to understand Bible passages as the adult understands them with a willingness to ask open questions and learn together. She commends practices such as ‘Godly

Play' which invite such openness; her perspective reflects a quotation Rebecca Nye offered: 'the only teacher in the room is Christ' (Sofia Cavalletti). Thomasson-Rosingh's perspective finally depends on faith: faith that Christ is present, teaching, when we encounter scripture together; faith that scripture will teach and form both us and our children even when we don't have good answers for their (or our) questions; faith that the Holy Spirit can use even their (and our) confusion or resistance to grow us into the likeness of Christ. As she says, 'If scripture is really inspired and inspiring then grown-ups do not have to defend either the Bible or God.'

Claire Smith writes about *Open the Book*, a project now run by Bible Society that demonstrates just these values in the context of primary school assemblies. Adults and children engage Bible stories together in creative ways, and everyone involved grows in their understanding of the scriptures. This is a huge good news story: thousands of volunteers in thousands of schools reaching hundreds of thousands of children regularly with the Bible and creating new mission opportunities for local churches. The ambition is larger, though: to bring the Bible to life in every primary school in England and Wales.

'Every primary school' covers a multitude of communities, varying hugely in size, context, cultural mix and the range of religious backgrounds of the pupils. Trevor Cooling writes about the nation's schools, secondary as well as primary, and the statutory duty they have to promote the 'spiritual development' of their pupils. In particular, he looks at how 'Christian-ethos schools' (what the media would report as 'faith schools') seek to be both faithful to their church foundation and also responsible to the multi-faith pupil intake they receive. He describes three very different schools that are successfully negotiating this challenge in their own contexts, and two innovative approaches to delivering subjects as diverse as hockey skills and geology within a Christian ethos.

Because modern British schools receive pupils of all faiths and none, Cooling notes that 'Christians can no longer expect the school to undertake the nurture of their child's Christian faith.' This recognition demonstrates the importance of family and church contexts for the development of children's faith. Olwyn Mark recently wrote a report, *Passing on Faith*, for the think tank Theos, in which she explores how faith is transmitted at home. She returns to this subject in our next article. The Bible clearly pictures and demands that the great stories of God's saving work will be passed from parents to children in the home, but this is not happening in many Christian homes. Where it is, parents are fearful both of failure and of success – concerned that their children will be mocked or bullied at school for their beliefs.

That said, the evidence is clear that young people's faith-identity is largely determined by their home life. Secular parents generally produce secular children. Christian young people are overwhelmingly likely to have grown up in a Christian home. Faith will be passed on most successfully, Olwyn Mark argues, through rituals, repeated embodied practices that instantiate beliefs and values. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the quality of the general home environment is also important: stable, happy, loving families more often lead to children embracing the faith of their parents.

There is also evidence that children will remain committed to Christianity if they experience church as something that belongs to them, not just to the adults. In our final piece, Lucy Moore writes about the astonishing growth of Messy Church, suggesting that what has made the model so successful is a commitment to being church for all ages together, rather than an adult church with children's activities, or a children's club with adults as spectators. In Messy Church we also see the creative shared exploration of scripture that our first three articles recommended. Moore also suggests that an orientation towards celebration and a focus on Jesus are crucial parts of the mix. Like *Open the Book*, Messy Church is a significant success story of our time.

Whilst all this focus on passing on belief, faith development, and the nurturing of spirituality fits well with an account of Christian development that sees baptism as the decisive moment of regeneration, some readers may wonder what has happened to conversion. At one level this is a question about descriptive emphasis: Olwyn Mark's account of passing on the faith, for example, could easily find space for accounts of particular crisis moments of decision within the young person's life, or for narratives of an experienced change in personal commitment over time. The articles do not emphasise these elements of a young person's testimony, but that does not mean they are excluded.

Providing for the spiritual development of our children is important. One of the harshest comments Jesus ever made was about those who cause believing children to stumble: 'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea' (Matthew 18.6, NRSV). Taken together, our articles in this issue offer us both a well-researched account of how children can grow in the faith, and a set of practical ideas of how we can work that account out in schools, homes and churches.