

STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

Children seem never to stop needing adults. Not only do they need the special protection of adults when they are very young, but every year on their birthday they need adults to celebrate who they are. During the tender years of childhood, they need more and more from adults—care, education, encouragement, physical and emotional protection. Then adolescence produces its own kind of vulnerability. And so youths still need the understanding, education, protection, and respect of the adults who share with them their teen years.

This journey of being cared for is God's design for the birth-to-young-adulthood pilgrimage. At each turn of the road and change of grade on that route, a growing child encounters different kinds of vulnerabilities and hazards, opportunities and blessings.

Songs and Ceremonies

If you've read the Bible, you know that children are so highly valued by God that their births are celebrated by songs (such as Hannah's in 1 Samuel 2:1-10) as well as by ceremonies (such as circumcision in the old covenant and infant baptism in the new covenant) in which families claim the covenant promises of God for their children. With these celebrations come also grave warnings of Jesus Christ against any man or woman who would cause one of his littlest ones to stumble: "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" (Matt. 18:6).

The protection of children is apparent in the Old Testament as the people of Israel were commanded by God not to harm their children in religious rites and to provide especially for children who are without parents (orphans and widows always being provided with special protection by the law and the prophets). Although ancient cultures surrounding Israel sacrificed their children to fertility gods, God called this horrible practice of Molech an abomination. King Ahab, for example, was condemned by God for practicing this very ritual (1 Kings 16:33,34).

This inflexible protection of children was at the very core of Israel's life. Consider that Abraham was interrupted on Mount Moriah at a moment when, for all he knew, God was demanding of him an act of worship identical to the Babylonian rites out of which he had come. But what Abraham and his son Isaac discovered on Moriah was the good news that God provides his own sacrifice; our religious task is simply to offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Lord of the Lamb for his love for us and to celebrate his love for our sons and daughters (Gen. 22:12-14). On Moriah the Lord of Israel once and for all intervened in favor of both father Abraham

and son Isaac. From then on the Lord of the Old and New Testaments would continue to stand between father, mother, son, and daughter in order to honor each one. The words to Abraham "Do not harm the child" still ring in our ears.

The Well-Intentioned Meddler

God has plainly and wonderfully interferred in our relationships with our children and with our parents. What we often think is a private relationship, hidden intimately within the personal boundaries of our own families, is not so private after all. Jesus Christ is the mediator in our relationships with our daughters and sons no less than he is in all other relationships of our lives.

St. Paul recognized this. He didn't instruct children to obey their parents in an absolute sense; he said instead, "Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*" (Eph. 6:1). The Lord Jesus Christ is a concerned party in every relationship; therefore children's obedience of parents is mediated by the greater authority of Jesus Christ—and that mediation is always in our favor, whether we are child or parent. The Lord never intended that anyone should exist in a stark, unprotected interpersonal relationship.

So we have an added stake in the safety of all children—the fact that our

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redeemer cares about them, too. This principle (or something similar) underlies most civilized societies, including the U.S. – which is why, according to laws in most states, any person aware of the abuse of children must report it in order to ensure the safety of children, who, because of their age and their size, cannot protect themselves. Such harm has spiritual implications as well. Pastors and youth workers especially must watch for child abuse if they are to fulfill their legal obligations in the defense of children at risk.

For Civilization's Sake

At an even deeper level, we must learn to heal those children who have suffered and those adults who inflicted the suffering. This ministry of encouragement of children and adults is what youth ministry is all about. In fact, such an investment in youth is for the very survival and health of civilization itself. The best part of this or any ministry to youth, of course, is watching them discover their own profound belovedness. It is then that we have shared in the blessing of these members of the population that Jesus loved so much – the children. Children who, whatever their age, need us. ♦



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