

Children, God, Jesus, and Salvation

"I want to be baptized." From time to time, a child will approach me, either with a parent or by himself, and say those words. What exciting words! These words express a recognition on the part of the child that baptism is important, that baptism means something special, and that baptism is something that is appropriate even for children, not just adults. While I always am always filled with excitement to hear those words, I also know that there's a lot behind those words, or at least there ought to be a lot behind those words. Behind those words are the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of the child. Behind those words is the child's understanding of God and of Jesus. Behind those words is the child's knowledge of what salvation means... or so one hopes.

In counseling with children who are thinking about some type of Christian commitment, I have several guiding thoughts on my mind:

- 1) to encourage the child's faith and celebrate his/her journey with God, letting him/her hear that "I'm so glad you are thinking about these very important things!"
- 2) to find out more about how the child understands what [blank] means, and [blank] could be baptism, or being a Christian, or accepting Jesus, or joining the church, or any variety of phrases or terms that a child might use to talk about the commitment he or she is making. (Take note that what is meant by these terms can be similar or can be very different.)

Encourage, Discern, Listen, Pray

3) to discern why the child, at this point in time, is making this choice: Is the Holy Spirit involved in prompting this child? Has external and undue pressure (even manipulation) been part of the process? Has the child seen other children make similar decisions? Does the child see [blank] as a "fix" for bad behavior, bad grades, or bad things happening to her? Is fear involved? Is the child responding to God or to others?

4) to listen carefully to what the child says and does not say, to what the child understands and does not understand, to what the child means and does not mean.

5) to carefully and prayerfully filter all of what is said and experienced during the time of counseling through the filter of what the Gospel means and what the child has come to understand about the Gospel: a) God loves us and created us, but b) we are broken (sinners) and we are not right with God, so c) God has provided the answer to our brokenness (sin-problem) in the person of

Jesus Christ who d) died on the cross for our sins and e) rose from the grave as the promise of eternal life which we can experience beginning now through f) the promise of the Holy Spirit; g) a Christian is someone who not only believes/understands these things, but who has chosen to live by them and to let Jesus be the boss of his/her life; h) baptism is the way a Christian tells the church about his decision to follow Jesus; i) joining the church is important because we need to be with other Christians to help us live out our commitment.

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I recall at age ten when I went forward during the invitation at the close of worship to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior that I knew without a shadow of a doubt that God had "aholt" of my heart. It was as though huge hands from the heavens descended, wrapped themselves underneath me between my bottom-side and the pew beneath me, and lifted me out of the pew, setting my little feet down the aisle. I cannot tell you that I had carefully systematized my theology so neatly as what I have outlined above (come on, I was only ten!), but I did understand the basics and knew that that day was my day to respond to what God had done for me through Jesus Christ. I do not expect every child that I counsel to have exactly the same (nor necessarily even a similar) experience as what I had, but I am always listening to the child to hear the voice of one who has heard from God and knows that he/she needs God.

And so, in counseling with children, I come to the humbling task with two scriptures in my mind: "Come to me as a child" (Matthew 18:3) and also "Weigh the cost of discipleship" (Luke 14:27-30) – scriptures which, for both child and adult, should guide our understanding of what it means when we say...

"I want to be baptized."

-Rendell
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